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Clarification

*TL Notes: Hi, let me offer some explanations first:
-First of all, these stories will be briefly referenced in volume 13, so it's not my fault if this got complicated, lol
-As you might have read in other afterwords (for example v7, but he'll say it again in v13 and v14, not to mention in other series), Nisio Isin sometimes writes chapters for a magazine, and later finishes the story and compiles that into a new volume. This seems to be the case for these 5 stories written kinda long ago already, all of them featuring the new character "Inspector Koshimai", stories which should be compiled into the missing volume "The Bulletin Board of Kyoko Okitegami" as v13 implies in no uncertain terms
-Unfortunately, the story's "climax" so to speak (the latter half maybe?) doesn't seem to be written yet, so I guess we can only wait
-Since we got no pics, to up the cool factor a bit, I'm showcasing the magazine covers

メフィスト

mephisto

KODANSHA NOVELS
講談社ノベルス

2018 VOL.2

新連載

竹本健治――「読んではいけない ―汎虚学研究会2―」

「復讐の協奏曲（コンチェルト）」――中山七里

新シリーズ短編

「ファーブル君の妖精図鑑」――井上雅彦

三津田信三――「妖服（ようふく）の如き切るもの」

「掟上今日子の撮影会」――西尾維新

有栖川有栖――最終回「インド倶楽部の謎」

第59回メフィスト賞発表！

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シリーズ短編――法月綸太郎　大倉崇裕　大山誠一郎　似鳥鶏

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Kyoko Okitegami's Photo Shoot (Mephisto 2018 Vol. 2)

At the Okitegami Detective Agency,
A request to find a missing person arrives—?

1
Inspector Koshimai was an exceedingly exceptional figure among the officers who sought investigative assistance from the Forgetful Detective. She was, in fact, so unique that she might as well have been the only one who considered Ms. Kyoko Okitegami a friend. Of course, she was acutely aware that this wasn't quite the truth. A friendship where one needs to present a police badge every time they meet simply cannot exist. Naturally, Ms. Kyoko herself adhered to the first rule of the Forgetful Detective, reset their relationship every day, with each sleep.

Yet, to Inspector Koshimai, Ms. Kyoko was a friend regardless. Even if the detective wasn't bound by her strict confidentiality, the policewoman would still visit the Okitegami Building for advice whenever an investigation hit a dead end. To tell the truth, there had been times when she had knocked on that door not for investigation reasons, but simply because she happened to be nearby and wanted to have tea during her leave. Her superiors frowned upon this behavior, but Koshimai believed that the real issue lay in the current system that prevented Ms. Kyoko from stepping into the spotlight despite her being the key to solving many cases. It was the law that was flawed. As a police officer, and yes, as a 'friend,' she never took Ms. Kyoko's reluctance to be in the limelight into account. To her that was what friendship meant: a type of consideration that disregards the other's wishes.

However, today's visit to the detective's office wasn't for tea or Ms. Kyoko's company—she was facing a bewildering case.

She came to seek advice—though this made her no different from other inspectors who visited Ms. Kyoko secretly with difficult cases. However, Koshimai's 'bewildering case' wasn't a secret or even a difficult one. It was the kind one might readily share on a blog, if she hadn't stopped updating hers after her boss reprimanded her for it.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Kyoko Okitegami, detective." The white-haired woman greeted her in the agency's reception room, treating her as if it were their first meeting.

"Ms. Kyoko, are you good at finding people?" Koshimai cut to the chase.

"Finding people? Well, I am a detective," she replied with a playful tone. "Though I've forgotten what I'm good at."

Adorable. The policewoman loved that mannerism. She adored her.

“It might be my specialty?”

The detective suggested.

Indeed, finding people is one of a detective’s main tasks—much more common than solving bloody serial killings.

But when it came to whether this was the main task of a famed detective, Koshimai wasn’t quite sure, so better to ask first.

“So your request is to find someone, Inspector Koshimai?”

“A request, you could say—”

Though she had entered with her police badge and would be paying a fee, categorizing it simply as a request felt somewhat inadequate to her.

“—It might be more of a grievance, or perhaps a love tale. Oh, not mine though.”

“Grievances and love tales are welcome. Either way, there’s a business opportunity there. It’s a goldmine waiting to be tapped,” Ms. Kyoko said, sounding less like a detective and more like an entrepreneur.

That entrepreneurial spirit (the second rule of the Forgetful Detective) was another of her charming traits in Koshimai’s eyes. To her, everything about Kyoko was praiseworthy.

In any case, being what she claimed to be her specialty, there was no room for refusal.

Inspector Koshimai got to the point, speaking as a friend.

2
Grievances and love tales.

The troublesome matter that made Inspector Koshimai want to bury her head in her hands came not through a report from a good citizen, but in the form of a consultation from a friend—not a one-sided friendship like she had with Ms. Kyoko, but from an old friend from student days.

“My fiancé went missing just before our wedding. I need your help to find him,” was the essence of it.

It’s not typically something you’d hear every day. A groom or bride getting cold feet and running away to a lesser or greater extent isn’t unheard of—it’s hard to say this especially in front of an old, intimate friend.

Therefore, in this case, the advice would be, “Trust your fiancé, and wait a bit longer,” but the friend was adamant.

'He’s not that kind of person.’

'He wouldn’t just disappear without a word.’

'Please, Koshimai, find my husband.’

With a face so desperate it was hard to outright refuse. However, it was debatable whether this constituted a case.

If it isn’t a case but rather a situation, it is a serious one. But for now, it’s a civil matter—not the same as a missing child.

Of course, an adult disappearing from societal obligations is a major concern, but that’s likely why her friend used her connections with Inspector Koshimai instead of going through usual police channels.

Having a fiancé disappear isn’t something one can easily discuss with the police or even parents. But the proverb “A friend in need is a friend indeed” seemed apt for such times.

If she was truly worried, the only thing Koshimai could advise, though it was difficult, was to officially file a missing person report in the police district where her fiancé lives. But if they weren’t married yet, could she file the report?

She could, but she would need to persuade his family. Such an awkward “marriage greeting,” which Koshimai, having no experience, couldn’t fully understand.

Honestly, Koshimai had been tired of her friend’s love stories since high school, so she saw this as just another lover’s quarrel. She was just relieved it happened before the wedding invitations were sent out and felt no urge to take it back to the office to assess its criminal nature.

'Please, Koshimai.’

'Aren’t we friends?’

'You’re the only one I can rely on.’

Given her pleas and her grip on Koshimai's hand, the best Koshimai could offer was, "How about hiring a detective for the matter?"—essentially passing the buck.

'This is the man I need you to find. His name is—'

Setting down her personal smartphone on the table, Koshimai displayed the photo her friend had forwarded to her.

Not an official police image, merely a personal snapshot capturing a moment of everyday life—him eating in his apartment, noodles supposedly cooked by her friend. When had she become that kind of person? Well, she likely didn't make the noodles, but it was a side of her Koshimai didn't know.

"They say photographs most express the heart of the photographer—so, this photo was taken by your friend?"

Ms. Kyoko picked up the smartphone from the table and held it up to the ceiling light, as if trying to see through it. Given that it wasn't a printed photo, nothing would appear different by doing so.

"Hmm, impressive. Handsome indeed."

Her comment was so off-target that it transcended absentmindedness, leaving Inspector Koshimai irritated for some reason. Surely, there was no logical reason to be annoyed over a (one-sided) friend complimenting another (old) friend's boyfriend.

"Well, it might be edited,"

she said.

"Edited? You mean digitally altered? Does your friend possess such advanced technical skills?"

"It's neither advanced nor particularly technical these days. Nowa—"

Koshimai started but then caught herself. Bringing up the concept of "nowadays" in front of the Forgetful Detective was a bit tactless.

For Ms. Kyoko, there is only today.

Which means, in essence, "nowadays" doesn't exist for her. But that doesn't mean Koshimai could just stop mid-sentence.

"…There are apps now that can tell you someone's location. Editing a photo is a breeze."

She managed to connect the ideas a bit awkwardly.

“You can resize, adjust colors, erase people who photobombed, and even change hairstyles or expressions—with a swipe of your finger. The idea that photos capture the truth is outdated.”

The remark about photos showing the photographer’s true heart had long lost its original meaning.

“Huh, that’s remarkable,”

Ms. Kyoko responded with a reaction that was hard to interpret—whether she was impressed by the technology or dismayed by it. She continued to hold up the smartphone, but it was clearly impossible to determine if a photo was edited just by looking at it that way.

“But finding someone based on an edited photo? Even for a master detective like me, that’s quite the challenge.”

“Well, I doubt this particular photo has been edited that extensively.”

Koshimai’s attempt to backtrack sounded contradictory, driven purely by her jealousy of her friend’s boyfriend.

Her friend might be vain, but certainly not foolish. Even if there was some digital enhancement, Koshimai hoped it wouldn’t hinder the detective.

Koshimai corrected her course, providing Ms. Kyoko with the boyfriend’s full name, age, occupation, and current address—not as a police officer, but as a friend, albeit in quotation marks.

Did this breach confidentiality? Perhaps, but.

“It seems she suspects foul play due to his disappearance just before their wedding. She thinks he might have been involved in some crime.”

“Were there any signs? Threats to his life?”

“No, it seems she believes he fell victim to a spur-of-the-moment crime like a robbery—simple as that.”

'You see, he’s really wealthy.’

The friend had claimed.

Koshimai herself wouldn’t know.

From her experience, such personal information often seemed more like boasting and wasn't very reliable—probably because she knew dissecting such claims might appear crass. The room in the photo, cluttered and cramped, didn't match the life of someone targeted for their wealth.

Since her friend had given her a spare key, she could search the apartment if she wanted. A room search could be quick. Even if Ms. Kyoko decided to do that, Koshimai, police officer though she was, could not join such an investigation. Though the table crowded with ingredients for somen noodles seemed more like her friend had overdone it more than anything else…

"Do you think she won over this wealthy man starved for ordinary affection with warm, home-cooked meals?"

If so, it would be quite a stereotypical story, but she didn't think Ms. Kyoko was seriously saying that. More likely, the detective seemed like the type who would dislike such a storyline.

"But inspector, he certainly seems wealthy. The clothes he wears are top-notch, and his accessories are exquisite."

"But the room is tiny."

"The utensils are far too fine for everyday use, and the furniture is tasteful. Maybe not famous brands, but certainly not cheap."

"But the room is tiny."

"People say you can gauge a lifestyle by the quality of the curtains, but unfortunately, the window isn't visible."

"Because the room is tiny."

Was that all she could manage to say?

At this point, she really was the petty friend jealous of another friend's boyfriend—each time Ms. Kyoko praised him, the policewoman reflexively countered.

"Hmm. So, Inspector Koshimai, you don't think this is a noble money-motivated crime?"

As a result, she inadvertently led the Forgetful Detective's reasoning astray. Although the way she phrased it, it almost sounded like a crime motivated by money could be considered noble.

It's the money that is valuable, not the crime.

…That too is a weird way to put it.

However, having come to the detective agency on behalf of a friend, she couldn't very well say she didn't think a crime had occurred in the first place—she couldn't admit she'd dumped a case with little criminal element on her, or worse, that she was merely using this as an excuse to have tea with Ms. Kyoko.

"We seem to think alike, Inspector Koshimai."

Hearing this out of the blue made her feel like the detective had sharply pointed out her guilty conscience. Think alike? In what way? Had she seen through the policewoman's one-sided sense of friendship?

If that were the case, it would be terribly embarrassing.

"In fact, I too do not think this is a crime motivated by noble money,"

Ms. Kyoko continued, while Koshimai felt a mixture of relief and—

(Hmm?)

So, setting aside whether it was noble or not, did Ms. Kyoko's opinion that it wasn't a money-motivated crime mean she saw this request as a crime of a different nature?

While a detective might take on a missing person case, the inspector hadn't expected her to find a criminal element in this 'disappearance.'

But perhaps this was to be expected.

Ms. Kyoko was not just any detective, she was a famed detective—one who seeks not only people but also the truth.

"Yes. I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning,"

said the fastest detective, delivering her catchphrase before adding, "By the way, would you like a refill of your tea, Inspector Koshimai? Perhaps some herbal tea for relaxation?"

She said this in an oddly leisurely manner.

3

"Ah! So, Inspector Koshimai, you were not aware of the real reason behind this man's disappearance when you asked for my help?"

With that, Ms. Kyoko returned the smartphone displaying the image to Inspector Koshimai with a flick.

“If that’s the case, it makes me a bit reluctant to share the truth.”

“Reluctant…? What do you mean by that?”

For the fastest detective, her words were unusually roundabout. Come to think of it, offering herbal tea was strange too. Relaxation? Why would Inspector Koshimai need to relax. Yet, she accepted the tea.

She couldn’t refuse.

“Please, Kyoko. Just tell me. Aren’t we on good terms?”

“On good terms…?”

“A-As a great detective and a client, of course. If you don’t tell me the truth, I can’t pay the consultation fee.”

“Let’s talk.”

She agreed, her willingness turning on a dime. It was almost suspicious how fast she had a change of heart. Should her first and second rules be reversed?

And what happened to being reluctant? Where did that disappear to—

“So, you already have a clue about where my friend’s boyfriend might be? Without even leaving this room?”

Inspector Koshimai was about to be impressed by the thought, a true mark of a great detective it seemed—until Ms. Kyoko nonchalantly replied, “No, that’s not it.”

“I have no idea where your friend’s boyfriend went—”

She went on.

“—And I don’t think this man is your friend’s boyfriend in the first place.”

“…What?”

“I don’t think they were near engagement or even had any promises for the future.”

“He…he’s a complete stranger, then?”

What sense did this make? Did her friend enlist her childhood friend, now an inspector, to find a complete stranger?

“A complete stranger… it’s hard to say that when she’s taking photos like these.”

“…Uh, so was it all a farce to brag to me about this 'handsome boyfriend’?”

Koshimai knew she was a braggart, but to go that far… Would she take a photo posted online and claim it’s her boyfriend? No, that didn’t explain why it wouldn’t be a complete stranger. Also, Ms. Kyoko had said, “taking photos like these.”

“Yes. No matter where this photo came from, there’s something odd about it. You kept pointing that out, Inspector Koshimai.”

“I did?”

Did she? The only thing she kept noting about this photo was—

“That the room is tiny? But even so…”

While the small room might be circumstantial evidence that he wasn’t wealthy, it didn’t prove he wasn’t her boyfriend—in fact, it seemed weirdly realistic to her.

If the wealth was a lie, but the boyfriend part was also a lie, could it be that the room itself was set up, rented for a day, complete with clothes and props?

But then, what about the spare key she had?

“This is the thing, Inspector Koshimai. The room isn’t tiny; it’s the sense of perspective that’s distorted.”

“Perspective…?”

As baffled as she was, she started to see a glimmer of what Ms. Kyoko was getting at—this photo provided by her friend had some kind of trick to it.

Digital alteration? Retouching?

Although she retracted it later, Inspector Koshimai had indeed first claimed it was manipulated, which is why Ms. Kyoko probably thought she knew the truth—

“No, this isn’t about tricks or post-processing. It’s a common phenomenon in photography called the compression effect.”

“Compression… effect?”

What was that?

It sounded familiar, yet unfamiliar…

“The truth in a photograph can be distorted—this has been true long before digital cameras came onto the scene. When someone says a picture 'doesn’t do them justice,’ it’s not merely a reflection of self-consciousness.”

Without any digital wizardry involved.

Ms. Kyoko stated plainly.

From the way she talked, it didn’t seem to require specialized knowledge after all. Basically, the reason the boyfriend’s room ('boyfriend’ being in quotes) looked tiny was because this lens compression pulled the background closer in the photo.

True, Koshimai has had moments herself looking at travel photos and thinking, “Did it really look like this?” It wasn’t mere nostalgia playing tricks.

There was a physical distortion at work. You could trust your memory more.

But so what? If it was a common effect in photography, there was nothing strange about it happening in a snapshot of a 'boyfriend.’

“The compression effect becomes most obvious with telephoto lens.”

She said. While adding a slight disclaimer of “it’s not always the case,” Ms. Kyoko emphasized the words “telephoto lens. Super-telephoto.”

“You know what a telephoto lens is, right?”

“Don’t underestimate me.”

Way to belittle the one acting as her assistant.

Isn’t it that bazooka-like thing?

“Yes. Simply put, the key to the compression effect is 'bringing distant light closer.’ The farther away, the more pronounced the distortion.”

“So, this photo… was taken from a very far distance?”

After saying not to underestimate her, Koshimai's question came out sounding like a fool's, but that understanding was correct. The compression effect was strong enough to make the room look tight… now she understood.

Certainly, it was strange.

Who on earth would take a photo of their boyfriend enjoying homemade food from hundreds of meters away? That's just spying.

Capturing a scene of the 'boyfriend' delighting in a dish—a snapshot of such a daily scene—did she take it through a window that was completely open along with the curtains? Was that why the window wasn't in the picture? Since he was eating somen noodles, it could be inferred that it was summer from his fashion too.

"Rather than spying, if indeed someone had a spare key, that would constitute—how should I phrase it—the act itself."

The act itself.

The vagueness didn't seem like something a great detective would say, but it was typical of Ms. Kyoko—Inspector Koshimai loved that about the forgetful detective the most.

Even if she didn't distort the truth.

She gently rephrased the truth.

But as a police officer and as a friend, Inspector Koshimai needed to be direct.

"It's stalking behavior, plain and simple… sigh."

Saying it made her feel depressed.

It was quite a shock to find out that an old friend of hers had become a stalker. The policewoman had thought of her as boastful and troublesome, but never imagined something like this—her not being just an idiot, but an actual criminal. It wasn't that she couldn't believe it, but rather she didn't want to believe it, and the stronger that feeling, the more it surfaced.

"If you want to confirm, you should investigate. Even for someone spying, this sense of perspective looks excessively telephoto—perhaps she couldn't get close to the 'boyfriend' for a reason.'"

"A restraining order, maybe?"

If the stalker went as far as making a spare key without permission, legal actions might already be in place. It's something a cop could quickly find out, even if investigating friends usually isn't the norm. But it falls within the realm where police power can be freely used, a criminal case, not a civil one.

Strangely, Koshimai didn't feel betrayed.

Rather, she was surprised that her friend had trusted her that much—perhaps it was true friendship.

"So, it's reasonable to deduce that he went missing to escape from a stalker who couldn't be stopped even by a restraining order. To protect himself, to protect his real girlfriend… what do you think, Inspector Koshimai? Should I still look into this man's whereabouts?"

'I'll waive the cancellation fee for the lesson', Ms. Kyoko said, placing a refill of herbal tea before Inspector Koshimai.

Yeah, she could use some relaxation.

The lesson was on the inspector's end: about the challenges of friendship and complexities in relationships. More challenging teachings would follow from Koshimai to her friend. It will be a tough education for both the giver and the receiver.

(But maybe this is a case of birds of a feather flock together…)

Her frequent visits to the Okitegami Detective Agency might not be something to be proud of. Her boss aside, anyone would likely view her actions with disdain, considering them a form of well-meaning disregard for the other party's wishes. It was nearly the same as her friend going the extra mile trying to mobilize the police to find the whereabouts of her stalking target.

No, it wasn't even a matter of one extra mile or two.

Bad news travels fast, and even a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

And it was always just a single step which made one cross the line, which goes for both the starting line and the finish line.

メフィスト

KODANSHA NOVELS
講談社ノベルス

2018 VOL.3

新連載

道尾秀介「カエルの小指 a murder of crows」

「掟上今日子の茶話会」——西尾維新

好評連載

竹本健治——「読んではいけない —汎虚学研究会2—」

「復讐の協奏曲（コンチェルト）」——中山七里

シリーズ短編

法月綸太郎——「殺さぬ先の自首」

巻末座談会

シリーズ短編——井上雅彦　三津田信三
連載小説——我孫子武丸　恩田陸　新堂冬樹
マンガ——喜国雅彦　玉川重機

Kyoko Okitegami’s Tea Party (Mephisto 2018 Vol. 3)

The self-proclaimed friend of the "Forgetful Detective",

Inspector Koshimai.

One day, she had an epiphany!

1

Inspector Koshimai considered Ms. Kyoko Okitegami, the Forgetful Detective, her best friend. She believed in her without a doubt, with a pure heart, and even admired her without hesitation. That's why Koshimai was always racking her brains, trying to figure out how to mold Ms. Kyoko's life into her ideal image.

Of course, she had no intention of criticizing Ms. Kyoko's skills as a detective. Even if they weren't friends, or even if they didn't get along, Inspector Koshimai would still seek her assistance with investigations. She even thought she heard her superior correct her, saying, "That's a hypothetical situation since she doesn't actually consider you a friend," but she let it slide as usual.

What Inspector Koshimai felt compelled to "improve" wasn't Ms. Kyoko's detective work or even her "forgetfulness." She understood very well that Ms. Kyoko's ability to reset her memory daily was integral to her genius as a detective. In an era obsessed with privacy while simultaneously oversharing information, Ms. Kyoko remained a fitting, albeit unconventional, detective precisely because of her "forgetfulness" combined with her sharp intellect. So that was fine. Some people might be disheartened by being treated like strangers every time they met, but Inspector Koshimai's friendship was unwavering.

When Ms. Kyoko said, "Nice to meet you," Koshimai would think, "Oh, I get to hear it again!" and it would make her absurdly happy. She even visited the Okitegami Building just to hear that line. To Inspector Koshimai, it was akin to Ms. Kyoko's signature catchphrase, "I knew the truth of this case from the very beginning."

What deeply concerned Inspector Koshimai, however, was Ms. Kyoko's life outside of being a detective—that of a 25-year-old woman named Ms. Kyoko Okitegami. She worried about her as if it were her own life on the line.

In fact, she worried *more* about Ms. Kyoko than about herself.

Ignoring her superior's phantom voice telling her to get her own priorities straight, she found herself wondering, "What does she do in her free time?"

If she asked Ms. Kyoko directly, she would probably reply, "Most likely investigating cases. It's my job, after all."

Which would be the correct answer, given that Ms. Kyoko was a renowned detective. That's her usual routine.

However, it's unlikely that she spent all 24 hours of every single day on the job—even the most sought-after detective had limits. Her cases were limited to those where her "forgetfulness" was an asset.

"What do you do in your free time?"

"I read books, go shopping, visit museums, I suppose. But I forget, so it's hard to say."

This meant that if today were her day off, that's how she'd spend it. While it was a predictable answer, hearing it from Ms. Kyoko herself brought a certain joy. Nonetheless, Inspector Koshimai was troubled by this nonchalant response.

Because she had realized something.

'Oh, what a revelation.'

'This person has no friends. Except for me.'

2

It had long been apparent that the Forgetful Detective wasn't very sociable—after all, she was the head of her own private detective agency, the Okitegami Detective Agency.

Despite running a private practice, she had the worldly knowledge and communication skills to deal with clients, people involved in cases, and even police officers. In fact, her skills could be considered exceptional—she had a natural ability to get close to people, much like a house cat.

In reality, she was more like a stray cat.

Clearly, Ms. Kyoko made it a point not to get too involved with people—she skillfully avoided social interactions with an invisible barrier.

Not resolutely, but flexibly.

She dodged relationships with a smile.

One could say that because she was the Forgetful Detective, and always greeted people with "Nice to meet you" due to her memory reset, she preemptively avoided forming relationships. This might sound like the plot of a tear-jerking drama, but from the perspective of Inspector Koshimai, the exception of all exceptions, it seemed like Ms. Kyoko was using her forgetfulness as an excuse to shirk the hassle of human relationships.

This was likely also because her other motto, "being the fastest," made such entanglements a nuisance... she aimed for maximum efficiency. In any case, she made no effort to broaden her social circle.

She never ventured into others' worlds, and if someone entered hers, she would politely ask them to leave.

This couldn't continue.

Inspector Koshimai made up her mind.

Firmly—resolutely. Not flexibly, but resolutely.

The phrase "Leave her alone because she probably prefers being by herself" did not exist in Inspector Koshimai's dictionary—not that such a long phrase would likely be in any dictionary. She was convinced that her mission was to bring Ms. Kyoko out into society.

Though it was clear that Inspector Koshimai's actual mission was to solve cases (since she was an inspector), she didn't let that concern her.

She resolved to give the socially awkward Forgetful Detective a social life—to fill Ms. Kyoko's private life to the brim.

Her ultimate goal was to make the seemingly impregnable Okitegami Building a welcoming place where anyone could drop by. As a first step, she decided to invite Ms. Kyoko out for tea.

And it wouldn't be just tea.

She would host a tea party.

3

"I prefer coffee over tea. Thank you for the invitation, but I must decline." With an elegant bow of her beautiful white-haired head, Ms. Kyoko declined without a hint of regret.

Despite having fabricated an investigation request (which there wasn’t), securing an appointment, and smoothly navigating her way into Ms. Kyoko's office reception room, Inspector Koshimai stumbled at the main topic.

Well, this was as expected. She had been similarly turned down when she invited Ms. Kyoko to watch an ice hockey game and to go diving in Okinawa ("I prefer air hockey," "I prefer skydiving").

Even if Ms. Kyoko’s settings reset daily as the Forgetful Detective, she was still a person, so perhaps her excuses followed a pattern, or maybe they were just stock phrases. Inspector Koshimai didn’t consider the possibility that she might have been persistently inviting Ms. Kyoko to the point where the latter was running out of excuses.

While Inspector Koshimai often felt genuinely down when her friend rejected her invitations, this time she felt more sadness than disappointment—she thought Ms. Kyoko was such a pitiable person.

'(She's probably forgotten, but I'm sure she's had some bad experiences with relationships in her school days, like someone hiding her pencil case.)'

Inspector Koshimai, who had an enriching school life, was not well-versed in classroom social hierarchies, but she wasn’t about to give up. She hadn’t set the goal of "becoming friends with everyone in the class" when she started high school for nothing, and she hadn’t achieved it as a joke. She even changed the hobby of a girl who always read mystery novels with explicit and grotesque scenes alone in the corner of the classroom to outdoor camping. Now, that girl only reads works that have won both the Naoki and Akutagawa Prizes—as in, none at all.

In other words, it wasn't like she hadn't come up with any plans to make Ms. Kyoko's social debut—she was going to try everything she could.

“Come on, it’s not like you’re allergic to tea. I think it’s worth giving it a try. I assure you, it will broaden your horizons.”

“Even if my horizons broaden, I’ll forget it all by tomorrow anyway.”

Any reasonable person would find themselves at a loss for words here and be forced to retreat, but fortunately, Inspector Koshimai was not a reasonable person. Whether this was fortunate or unfortunate for whom, we shall leave aside for now.

“Oh, don’t worry, your tongue will remember. Besides, if you really insist, you’re more than welcome to drink coffee. The point is not to drink tea, but to chat."

It would be more accurate to call it a "girls' get-together," since they could drink coffee, alcohol, or anything else—it wouldn't be a misnomer to call it a drinking party.

So, the choice of words here was a matter of Inspector Koshimai's personal aesthetic. She felt that "Ms. Kyoko Okitegami's Tea Party" suited the image she had of Ms. Kyoko better than "Ms. Kyoko Okitegami's Girls' Get-Together" or "Ms. Kyoko Okitegami's Drinking Party." Whether that image was real or imaginary was another matter...

"To chat, you say? As a detective, I'm ashamed to admit that I'm not very eloquent. I wouldn't know what to talk about and would probably just end up stammering."

The way she smoothly evaded the invitation made her seem quite eloquent. Koshimai would love to see Ms. Kyoko stammering, just once. It would be adorable, she was sure.

"Well, you're welcome to just listen."

Just listening and drinking tea? I suppose I could do that. But if I'm just going to be left out of the conversation, I might as well stay home."

She had a point. Was this a tactic to shift the argument and muddy the waters? Koshimai recalled a girl from her third year of junior high school, a girl who hadn't said a word during self-introductions. Koshimai had eventually succeeded in turning that girl's room into a regular hangout spot for mixers, but it seemed this time would be even tougher.

"But, Ms. Kyoko, if you really don't want to go, I won't force you..."

"I really don't want to go."

"But then people will think you're scared."

Ms. Kyoko had flatly refused, so Inspector Koshimai decided to provoke her. Of course, the Forgetful Detective wouldn't rise to the bait. It was truly a powerful thing to be able to forget any words spoken to you by the next day.

"Well, it's true, I am scared. The thought of someone as lowly as me attending a gathering of elegant ladies is terrifying."

Lowly?

The invisible wall she had erected was immeasurably high. It wasn't exactly retaliation, but it was now Inspector Koshimai's turn to seize on a phrase.

"That's where your imagination is suspect—because at this tea party, we're planning to talk about a certain 'mystery.'"

"A certain 'mystery'?"

"Yes."

A certain mysterious item.

4

The fact that she reacted to the word ‘mystery’ showed she was still very much a detective—though for Ms. Kyoko, solving mysteries was work, business, and a matter of profit and loss.

She wouldn't lift a finger for a mystery that didn't pay a single yen, or just to face off against a cunning criminal. The Forgetful Detective's willingness to take on a case was basically fueled by money.

That was all well and good, but at least the keyword "mystery" seemed to have given Ms. Kyoko, who had probably been thinking at high speed about how to get this solicitor out of her office, a reason to pause. It might not have been enough to slam on the brakes, but it was enough to ease off the gas.

Hooray for mysterious items.

“Ms. Kyoko, do you know what a tea timer is?”

“Even for a coffee person like me, I at least know that much—it’s essentially an hourglass, right? Used to measure the time for steeping tea.”

“Exactly. That’s the focus of this tea party.”

“I can’t imagine it being the main attraction of a gathering. If it were a teacup or a teaspoon, maybe, but a tea timer? Nowadays, you can just use a watch instead of a timer.”

The fact that she didn’t mention a smartphone shows she’s the Forgetful Detective—if she had, one could argue that paper cups could replace teacups, and plastic teaspoons could replace regular ones. Though, considering the environment, we should be reducing plastic use.

"But this tea timer is more than capable of taking center stage. It's not exactly tableware, but... well, listen to this. Originally, the plan for the tea party was for each participant to bring their own prized tea set."

“How elegant and lavish. It’s like an event from another world.”

That might have been her way of refusing, but it also seemed like her honest impression. And Koshimai basically agreed with her. The difference was that Inspector Koshimai was the type of person who wanted to participate in events from another world. To someone like Inspector Koshimai, who believed “a friend of a friend is a friend,” there wasn’t a gathering she couldn’t join. She might not have had money, but the wealth of friendships she had built since her school days enriched her life.

She really wanted Ms. Kyoko to join the community—this tea party was the first step.

Inspector Koshimai continued her explanation.

"The condition for bringing a tea set was that it couldn't just be expensive, it had to have some kind of story behind it. I guess it was so we'd have something to talk about over a cup of tea. Like a tea saucer that Marie Antoinette used as a frisbee, or a silver spoon that Sen no Rikyu was born clutching."

She might have mixed up her tea ceremonies, but she didn't want them to sound too highbrow, this much levity would work just fine.

"And what a certain lady brought was this tea timer. A mysterious tea timer... or perhaps I should say a magical tea timer, since 'mystery' sounds a bit shady."

"There's nothing shady about mysteries."

Oh, there's the famous detective.

“Magical? If you flip it, does the sand flow back up, rewinding time or something?”

“It’s not that fantastical. It's really just a tiny, insignificant, and cute little magic trick, something you might not even feel like figuring out, designed to make your tea time last a bit longer.”

“A magic trick you might not even feel like figuring out—that’s quite the fantasy description. What exactly does it do?”

It seemed her interest was piqued. For the time being, Ms. Kyoko had decided not to kick Inspector Koshimai out of her office. Excellent.

The prey, or rather, the friend, was caught in the trap.

She couldn't let this opportunity slip away.

“First, to describe its shape specifically, it’s not a single hourglass, but rather, five hourglasses fixed side by side in a metal frame.”

"Five? Three is more common. For example, a one-minute, two-minute, and three-minute hourglass in a set of three, so you can measure any steeping time. Are you saying this magical tea timer measures time in even finer increments?"

"That's right. Let's say one minute, one and a half minutes, two minutes, two and a half minutes, three minutes – a truly versatile tool for any type of tea."

“Claiming it's magical just because of that is quite an exaggeration. It's not even that impressive. As the head of a detective agency that prides itself on fairness, I can't overlook this.”

The policewoman thought Okitegami Detective Agency prided itself not on fairness but penny-pinching, but now was not the time to digress.

"But the thing is, no one knows how this tea timer works. It's a complete mystery."

"How it works? As you just said, it's essentially five different hourglasses combined into one, right? Like a watch with multiple dials that can display the times of various countries. Whether it's three or five dials, it doesn't change the fundamental concept.”

"But there's only one type."

"One type?"

"There are five identical, or at least seemingly identical, hourglasses lined up... and yet each one measures a different amount of time. One minute, one and a half minutes, two minutes, two and a half minutes, three minutes. Isn't that strange? That shouldn't be possible, should it?"

“...”

'I know it's your job to uncover the truth behind gruesome crimes, but wouldn't it be nice to solve an everyday mystery like this once in a while, a private mystery, a little bit of magic?'—Inspector Koshimai suggested, causing Ms. Kyoko to hum thoughtfully and fold her arms.

'Yes! She's thinking about it now.'

Inspector Koshimai did a mental fist pump.

5

Some of you youngsters out there might be wondering, "What even is an hourglass?" So, just in case, let me explain.... Picture a transparent glass container, hermetically sealed. It's pinched in the middle, giving it a shape roughly resembling the Orion constellation. Inside, a specific amount of fine sand acts as the timekeeper. Stand the container upright, and naturally, the sand

inside falls through the narrow passage. A fixed amount of sand takes a fixed amount of time to flow from the top to the bottom. The beauty of this timepiece is its perfectly symmetrical design; flip it over, and it measures the same amount of time. No complicated technology involved. No need for charging or refilling. And unlike a sundial, it even works on cloudy days (though I'd love to explain the difference between a sundial and a solar-powered wristwatch sometime, but let's save that for another day). Of course, it might not be as accurate as a quartz watch, but its simplicity leaves little room for trickery... or so you'd think.

"The time an hourglass measures is basically determined by two factors: the size of the hourglass itself and the amount of sand inside," Ms. Kyoko stated.

She remained with her arms crossed.

It went without saying—once, on a trip abroad, the other had seen a mega-sized hourglass at some tourist spot that could theoretically measure a full twenty-four hours. It was so heavy, though, that it was structurally impossible to flip over...

"And you're saying those factors are identical in all five hourglasses lined up side-by-side? That the size and the amount of sand inside are exactly the same?"

"Since there's a thirty-second difference in the actual time they measure, they can't be identical, even if they look like five of the same hourglass lined up. But the difference isn't apparent to the untrained eye. That's why I wanted a detective's perspective."

That was a lie.

It wasn't that she wanted another perspective. The magical tea timer was just an excuse to get Ms. Kyoko to attend the tea party. Inspector Koshimai had gone to great lengths to persuade the elegant ladies to hold this second gathering, all for Ms. Kyoko's sake.

The ladies seemed more interested in the "master detective" herself than the magical tea timer. Although, the owner of the tea timer genuinely wanted to understand its mechanism. She even mentioned, in a rather refined manner, that she had considered taking it apart completely. It turns out the tea timer was a birthday gift from a distant relative, and when she asked the giver about it, they said they had bought it at an antique market and didn't know how it worked.

Inspector Koshimai found it curious, of course. But as she'd said before, it was the kind of mystery she could live without solving. She'd rather enjoy her tea.

Ultimately, waiting for tea to steep was no different from killing time with a smartphone game... but not for a master detective. Even if she was a slave to money rather than justice, she wouldn't treat it so lightly. If only the magical tea timer could entice Ms. Kyoko to attend the tea party, to make her debut in society, to see this mystery with her own detective's eyes... then her

plan would be a success. And if it took a mercenary motive like befriending wealthy socialites to get her there, so be it. Or so Inspector Koshimai thought, until...

"An insignificant bit of magic, you say, Inspector?" Ms. Kyoko said. "You've really gone and done it now."

“Huh?”

Finally—though, in reality, she hadn't held the pose for even a minute – Ms. Kyoko unfolded her arms and shook her head as if genuinely perplexed.

She had gone and done it?

"This isn't some insignificant everyday mystery. This, my dear Inspector, is a gruesome crime by my definition."

'The magical tea timer employs a horrible murderous trick, one entirely unsuitable for polite conversation over tea'—Ms. Kyoko, usually very friendly, declared with the straightest face Inspector Koshimai had ever seen on her.

6

"Of course, having made such a bold claim, I'm obligated to solve this mystery—but I'm curious, Inspector. What are your thoughts on this tea timer?"

Thoughts? She had none.

She had thought it was "strange," sure, and that thought had fueled a brief moment of excitement. But she hadn't actually considered investigating the strangeness. If she were the type to do that, she'd be a detective, not an inspector. Though, if it was a murder trick, then perhaps it was the inspector's job to investigate...

But an hourglass and murder? What an odd pairing.

"Well, if the shape of the glass containers and the amount of sand inside are the same, but they measure different amounts of time, then the speed at which the sand falls must be different. It'd be difficult to measure with the naked eye, but I assume the one-minute timer has the fastest flow, and the three-minute timer the slowest."

She spoke the obvious to buy herself time to think—she didn't want to get stuck in a dynamic where the detective was the fastest and the inspector the slowest.

"Yes, I suppose so. The question is, why the difference in speed? That's the murderous part."

"Could it be that the sand itself is different, even if it looks the same? Like, maybe the weight is different?"

There had to be different kinds of sand.

The sand from the Tottori Sand Dunes and the sand from the Sahara Desert couldn't be identical—and then there were the more exotic varieties, like singing sand and star sand, which wasn't even made of rock.

Sand was essentially finely ground stone, so the weight and density would vary depending on the type... Could it be that the one-minute timer used sand made from crushed iron ore, while the three-minute timer used sand made from pumice?

"Have you never heard of Galileo Galilei's experiment, Inspector?"

She was exasperated.

Ah, right. Even if the weight of the sand was different, the speed of the fall would be the same. It seemed counterintuitive that a heavier object wouldn't fall faster than a lighter one. It was Inspector Koshimai's fault for forgetting such a basic tenet of physics, so she couldn't blame Ms. Kyoko for being exasperated. But honestly, no matter how many times she heard it, physics never made sense to her...

Feeling the need to voice her frustration, Inspector Koshimai began, "But Ms. Kyoko, making assumptions without even seeing the actual thing—"

"That's what a detective's eye is for," Ms. Kyoko cut her off.

So, her entire plan to lure Ms. Kyoko out with the magical tea timer had been flawed from the start, based on a faulty intuition.

But she couldn't back down now. If the magical tea timer was a murder weapon, then Inspector Koshimai couldn't ignore it, even if her title was "inspector" in name only.

"To be fair," Ms. Kyoko said, "and to manage expectations, I haven't actually seen the object in question. I'm not basing my deductions on any concrete evidence, and I'm not claiming that my reasoning is infallible. In fact, my accuracy rate is probably less than twenty percent."

"Twenty percent..."

That sounded awfully low for a famous detective, almost pessimistic. But thinking back, maybe that was Ms. Kyoko's average success rate.

However, even with a low accuracy rate, her answer rate was close to one hundred percent—she was the fastest detective, always buzzing in with an answer, even if she didn't know it for sure.

Since she wasn’t limited to three guesses or penalized for mistakes, "keep answering until you get it right" was a valid strategy. Ms. Kyoko's only limitation was time.

Considering all that, if there was even a twenty percent chance that the hourglass was a murder weapon, then that probability was significant. Who would ride a rollercoaster with a one in five chance of crashing?

But if it was a murder trick, who was it intended to kill?

"If the glass containers are identical, the amount of sand is the same, yet the hourglasses measure different times, the first thing to consider is the shape of the sand itself."

Ms. Kyoko, without waiting for Inspector Koshimai's second thoughts, briskly launched into action—or rather, into unraveling the mystery. With that, Inspector Koshimai's hopes of smoothly escorting Ms. Kyoko to the tea party vanished like foam. The kind of creamy foam good beers have.

However, at this point, curiosity outweighed disappointment. (Sadly, she still couldn't muster a sense of urgency worthy of a seasoned inspector – a murder trick involving an hourglass? Seriously?)

"The shape of the sand?"

"You didn't mention that, unlike the shape of the glass containers. So, we'll consider the container angle as our second and third possibilities and address them later."

Second and third possibilities – in other words, Ms. Kyoko's infamous exhaustive deduction style.

"In short, assuming the two-minute timer is a standard hourglass, the sand in the one-minute and one-and-a-half-minute timers could be shaped to minimize air resistance – polished into streamlined forms. Conversely, the sand in the two-and-a-half-minute and three-minute timers could be made irregular and bumpy, designed to snag on itself. This way, even if the same type of sand is used, there would be a significant difference in the falling speed."

"Hmm..."

Now that she mentioned it, it did make sense.

It was a convincing explanation, almost too reasonable to be considered a murder trick. It seemed like a perfectly valid hypothesis that left no place for second or third possibilities. But...

"Ms. Kyoko, you don’t think that’s the case, do you?"

"If you're going to listen to me with that attitude, I'll stop talking."

She was angry.

Inspector Koshimai apologized – it seemed Ms. Kyoko wasn't fond of having her exhaustive deductions interpreted as a mere formality.

"It could be the correct answer, you know. It would be incredibly tedious to polish and scratch each grain of sand, but it's not impossible—it would be obvious if you looked closely, but sand grains naturally have individual differences."

Now that she mentioned it, Inspector Koshimai had to agree – having seen the tea timer firsthand (though not with a detective's eye), she couldn't recall any difference in the shape of the sand grains, but she hadn't exactly scrutinized them.

However...

"However," Ms. Kyoko continued, flipping her hand over.

The other wasn’t so oblivious as to say "I knew it" at this point.

"There is one obvious flaw."

"...That it takes too much effort?"

"The effect wouldn't last long for the amount of effort required. It's sand, after all. As you repeatedly flip it over, the streamlined or irregular shapes would wear down and eventually settle into an average form due to friction."

That's right—sand was formed that way in the first place.

That would make it an extremely short-lived toy—which wasn't impossible, but how appropriate would it be as a gift for a wealthy socialite?

It made Inspector Koshimai want to explore the second and third possibilities even more.

"Realistically, if you change the shape of each grain of sand, the total volume would also change. Regardless of whether I believe it or not, I wouldn't recommend it."

Ms. Kyoko was the type to remember the important details, even if she seemed forgetful at times.

"The second and third possibilities were about the container, not the sand, right? But the shape of the containers is all..."

"They might look the same, but they're not identical. You wouldn't phrase it so vaguely unless you were implying something, right?"

Inspector Koshimai felt like she was being accused of using a narrative trick, but it was impossible to kill someone with a narrative trick.

"So, as a second possibility, the thickness of the glass could be different, even if the outside looks the same."

"Thickness? But if the thickness changes—"

"Yes, the amount of sand inside would also change. In other words, even if the falling speed of the sand is exactly the same, the time it takes to measure would be different—essentially, they're changing the volume of the hourglass by altering the thickness of the glass."

If the inner circumference of the container is reduced by making the glass thicker, the height of the sand would increase even if the amount of sand remained the same—conversely, if the height is kept constant, the amount of sand can be reduced.

As a result, it would be possible to create a time difference between five seemingly identical hourglasses—wouldn't it?

Logically, it made sense.

No, it wasn't logical, it was absurd.

"That's why we have multiple hourglasses, right? If you line up a one-minute and a three-minute timer, the difference in the refractive index caused by the glass thickness would be obvious. But if you gradually increase the thickness from right to left, or left to right, wouldn't it be harder to distinguish the difference?"

Now that she mentioned it, it was hard to say for sure – Inspector Koshimai hadn't been drinking tea while paying attention to such details. Was it like those sake shops that adjust the volume of their measuring cups by changing the thickness of the wood, thereby manipulating the amount of sake they sell?

"So, you're saying that this second hypothesis is correct, without even needing to present the third one?"

So, the murder trick was to hit someone over the head with a thick piece of glass disguised as a thin one?

"Not necessarily," Ms. Kyoko said, shaking her head with a smile.

It seemed Inspector Koshimai had dodged a bullet by not jumping to conclusions.

"It might look that way to the naked eye, but it's a tea timer, after all. You wouldn't operate it remotely... you have to touch it, hold it, and flip it over."

"And... what happens then?"

"What happens is, the weight you feel when you hold it from the right side would be different from the weight you feel when you hold it from the left side."

Different thickness means different weight – if the thickness gradually increases from one side to the other to make the difference less noticeable, the imbalance becomes even more pronounced.

So, it wouldn't be the weight of the sand that's different, but the weight of the glass.

If one side is light, the other side is heavy—unbalanced.

"Our fingertips are far more sensitive than our eyes—even if you don't notice it visually, once you touch it, it's obvious."

Koshimai thought that using the phrase "obvious" here was one reason Ms. Kyoko didn't have many friends, but of course, she wouldn't be so insensitive as to say it out loud.

"Not that there's anything wrong with that. It's fine as a toy, and if the design concept was to maintain a unified, aesthetically pleasing design, then it's a great success. But if you're going to call it a magical tea timer, you can't have a trick that's so obvious to the touch, can you?"

It seemed that Ms. Kyoko was implying that since the point of the item was to make people wonder why the seemingly identical hourglasses measured different times, it would be difficult to implement a trick that would make the weight noticeably different on either end, whether it was the sand or the glass—Inspector Koshimai hadn't felt any such imbalance when she held it at the first tea party.

"However, I'm putting this second hypothesis on hold as well, since the difference in weight would only be a matter of grams, and most people probably wouldn't notice it."

"What's the third hypothesis?"

"The third hypothesis is an improved version of the second one. It's not a bad plan to focus on the inside of the container rather than the outside – for example, instead of manipulating the entire vessel, couldn't you adjust the thickness of the inside of the neck, where the sand flows through, to control the speed?"

"I think it's possible... but the neck is already a very narrow tunnel, isn't it? I doubt there's much room for such delicate work..."

"Then we just need a different kind of delicate work. How about carving rifling?"

"Rifling?"

A rifle. Spiral grooves? Finally, a term that sounds like it belongs to a murder weapon—

"Not a rifle or spiral grooves, but rifling. Well, it's the same thing."

"It's the same thing?"

"In short, it means that for the one-minute timer, you carve tiny grooves into the inner surface of the glass to create a path for the sand to fall through more easily – conversely, for the three-minute timer, you make the inner surface jagged and wavy to make it harder for the sand to fall through. Like speed bumps on a road. Or like the villi in the digestive system, increasing the surface area."

The speed bump analogy was understandable, but the villi comparison made it a bit confusing—time to organize her thoughts.

So—that's why it's like a rifle.

Grooves are carved into the barrel of a gun to efficiently utilize the energy from the gunpowder explosion to propel the bullet straight... the same thing applied to an hourglass? Traffic control for the sand to prevent the falling energy from dispersing... if that's the case, then even with the same amount of sand, you could create an hourglass where the sand flows smoothly and one where it gets stuck.

"Well, then it seems like there wouldn't be any noticeable difference in the thickness or weight of the glass," Koshimai mused. "Of course, the weight of the glass would be reduced by the amount of the rifled grooves or the speed bumps carved into it, but since the mechanisms would be applied equally on both sides (making it lighter towards the left and right with the plain hourglass in the middle), it wouldn't be something you could notice by touch."

"So, does that mean this third hypothesis is correct—that the same technology used in rifles is being used here, making it a murder trick?"

Koshimai said this thinking it was quite a stretch, but Ms. Kyoko, with a composed look, replied, "I think it's the most likely, but if that's the case, then we'll have to revise the probability calculation from earlier to thirty-three percent."

Thirty-three percent?

Ah, because it's one-third. Ms. Kyoko had said it was twenty percent or less. Meaning... there wasn't just a third hypothesis, but a fourth? A fifth?

Could it be that she had matched the number of hypotheses to the number of hourglasses?

"If the third hypothesis is the most likely, then the fifth hypothesis is the most dangerous. If you're in a hurry, Inspector Koshimai, we can skip the fourth possibility."

"Of course, I want to hear it. Isn't that obvious?"

"The fourth possibility is the most... ridiculous, unlikely one."

One would think it was absurd to even consider such a thing as a hypothesis, but that was probably an unavoidable drawback of exhaustive reasoning.

"The fourth possibility involves using perspective."

"Eh—perspective?"

Koshimai had often heard of detectives who solved mysteries through the process of elimination—but using perspective was a first for her.

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine several similar hourglasses of different sizes, arranged from smallest to largest, receding into the distance. Surprisingly, they will all appear to be the same size."

"..."

Perspective.

It's a technique used in trick photography.

Koshimai had a lot she wanted to say, but since Ms. Kyoko had prefaced it with "the most ridiculous," she couldn't say anything.

"The five hourglasses aren't fixed side by side in a frame but arranged diagonally like steps."

"...Wouldn't that be obvious just by looking at them?"

That forced perspective trick only worked in photographs or paintings. Unless you were looking at it perfectly straight on, it would be obvious at a glance. If you placed it on a table and observed it, you would inevitably end up looking down at it... It was an even more unlikely possibility than she had initially thought.

Just as Koshimai regretted asking, they finally arrived at the fifth possibility... the real deal. No, the third possibility was still the most likely, making the fifth a risky long shot.

Not a trick photo, but a murder trick.

"The fifth hypothesis ultimately hinges on completely trusting your account, Inspector Koshimai. In other words, we assume that the shape of the hourglasses and the amount of sand are not just seemingly identical, but completely identical."

The way Ms. Kyoko phrased it made it sound like she was implying Koshimai was an "untrustworthy narrator"... but if both the container and the contents were the same, then the time measured would also be the same, wouldn't it?

"Not necessarily. There are other components to the magical tea timer, aren't there?"

"Other components... the frame?"

A trick in the frame?

Could it be that the one-minute and one-and-a-half-minute timers had powerful vacuums built into their bases that sucked up the sand, while the two-and-a-half-minute and three-minute timers had fans that pushed the falling sand back up? No, that was even more ridiculous and unlikely than the fourth hypothesis. It was an idea that wouldn't even be caught in the net of exhaustive reasoning.

But if it wasn't the frame, then Koshimai couldn't see any other elements that made up the hourglass—

"You're right, you can't see it. Because it's invisible."

"Huh?"

"This component is colorless and transparent—and, by the way, you can't touch it either."

Air.

The Forgetful Detective said.

7

Air. Yes, there's air.

Koshimai wasn't sure if it was right to call it a component, but it was at least present inside the hourglass container—the part inside that's not sand is all air.

"Strictly speaking, it's a gas."

With that clarification, Inspector Koshimai roughly understood the gist of the fifth possibility the Forgetful Detective was talking about. When people said "air," they usually meant the typical air: 78% nitrogen, 21% oxygen, 1% argon, 0.03% carbon dioxide, and so on. But when talking about "gas," it could be anything.

Infinite variety, diverse and multifaceted.

And—even if the five hourglasses looked identical and were actually designed the same way, it didn't mean that the gas filling the empty space was also identical.

It was impossible to distinguish them with the naked eye because they were colorless and transparent. Ms. Kyoko had said they couldn't be touched either, which probably referred to the properties of gas, but even if you picked up the tea timer itself, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference in weight. No matter how skilled you were, distinguishing the weight of gases... If you wanted to differentiate the properties of gases...

"So, you're saying that if the properties of the sealed gases are different, the air resistance they create will also change, and that's how the time difference is created?"

"Even if you don't know about Galileo Galilei, you must know the phrase 'assuming no air resistance.' It's a phrase that never quite sits right, isn't it?"

"..."

Even if humans can't distinguish between them, oxygen is lighter than carbon dioxide, and hydrogen is lighter than oxygen—just as there are different types of sand, there are different types of gases. Of course, there probably aren't any gases heavier than sand, so no matter what gas is sealed inside, the hourglass itself would still function—unless it was a toxic gas that could dissolve the sand.

"That's the point, Inspector Koshimai. You've finally hit the mark."

Koshimai wished Ms. Kyoko wouldn't praise her as if she had been saying irrelevant things all along. She wasn't that kind of sidekick.

"That's the crux of the trick—the crux of the murder trick. As I mentioned earlier, I honestly think the rifling idea is more likely than changing the type of gas—but if there is a reason to go through the trouble..."

"...Isn't it simply to increase the difficulty of the mystery? To make it harder to understand why the time difference occurs... Rifling ultimately creates a path, and if you keep observing, you'll eventually figure out the mechanism, but if the air inside is changed, there's no way to tell the difference."

"But what if someone tried to distinguish them? What if a curious lady of leisure desperately wanted to know how it worked?"

She would call a detective—no, a normal person wouldn't call a detective. That was an option only available to Inspector Koshimai, who considered herself Ms. Kyoko's best friend.

Yes, normally... as the lady of leisure herself had said...

"She would take it apart... right?"

"Yes. And what would happen then? Would the mystery be solved, would the magic be broken?"

"...If the air was tampered with, then smashing the sealed container would only make the evidence literally vanish into thin air. You can't see it, you can't touch it... Ah, no, that's not right."

Koshimai just thought of something.

If you want to distinguish the properties of gases—even if you can't see them, you could smell them. Just like in a science experiment, when you identify the contents of a test tube by the scent escaping from the glass container—

"And what if that scent was toxic?"

"!"

"What if the gas was harmless to the sand but toxic to humans? Or what if it was harmless on its own but became toxic when mixed with the contents of the next 'test tube,' causing a chemical reaction? The moment the curious individual, driven by their inquisitive nature, destroyed the tea timer, they would be assaulted by the murderous intent in the form of poison gas."

It was like the story of the goose that laid the golden eggs, where someone tried to dissect it to learn its secret but was met with an unexpected counterattack. Poison gas.

A murder trick, indeed.

"Furthermore, it doesn't even have to be poison gas. If you just want to change the air resistance, it's easier to adjust the concentration of a single type of gas inside the hourglass than to prepare five different types of gases. If you create a vacuum in the one-minute timer and fill the three-minute timer with a high concentration of gas, they can no longer be said to have the same properties. Even something as common as oxygen or carbon dioxide can cause poisoning depending on its concentration."

And the evidence would vanish into thin air. Even if the broken tea timer was found next to the victim, who would think it was a murder weapon?

In that case, the suspect would be the distant relative who gifted the magical tea timer—perhaps for inheritance or some inexplicable grudge.

It was ironic that an analog hourglass would be used as a time bomb... No, Koshimai couldn't just assume it was actually rigged that way. As Ms. Kyoko had admitted, the third hypothesis was probably the correct one. Even if the fifth hypothesis was right on the mark, thinking that poison gas was sealed inside was a bit too much of an occupational hazard. Koshimai could even say that the fourth hypothesis was more acceptable, but...

But at the very least, there was no mistaking that this was not a topic suitable for a tea party.

The tea party was over before it even began.

"...But, Ms. Kyoko. Even if, by some chance... no, even if it's a twenty-percent-or-less possibility and it is a murder trick, isn't 'horrible' a bit too much? After all, even if the worst-case scenario is quietly unfolding, we can put a stop to it now."

If Koshimai subtly warned the leisurely lady right away, she could at least confirm that it was all a false alarm. It wasn't exactly commendable, but the murder trick, which could be categorized as attempted murder or a crime of probability, was difficult to immediately label as a cruel and gruesome one. Koshimai wondered how lethal a "murder weapon" could be, even at its highest concentration, if it could fit inside an hourglass container. Even if it was completely successful, it was a plan with extremely uncertain results. Speaking of occupational hazards, Ms. Kyoko was able to face even the most heinous crimes with a straight face because she would forget about them the next day. So for her to specifically use the word "horrible" meant there was something more to it, didn't it?

"Because I heard about it, I had no choice but to solve the mystery."

Ms. Kyoko spoke bitterly, as if she had drunk black coffee.

"This is unpaid work, isn't it? That I, of all people, would fall victim to such exploitative work, oh, what a gruesome, sinister crime this is."

"...I'll at least cover the tea costs."

It seemed that the debut of the whimsical Forgetful Detective in high society was not going to be a piece of cake.

メフィスト

KODANSHA NOVELS
講談社ノベルス

2019 VOL.1

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新連載

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マンガ 喜国雅彦　玉川重機

Kyoko Okitegami’s Field Day (Mephisto 2019 Vol. 1)

What's the special proposal
presented to Ms. Kyoko by the
self-proclaimed friend of the Forgetful Detective—?

1

When Inspector Koshimai visited the Okitegami Building, home to the self-proclaimed "Forgetful Detective," she usually harbored, though hesitant to admit, an ulterior motive. It was often a desire to have a difficult case, one beyond her own capabilities, solved within a day by leveraging the Forgetful Detective's extraordinary abilities, or perhaps a selfish wish to deepen her friendship with Ms. Kyoko.

However, this particular visit was different. She swore, with absolute certainty, that this time she had no ulterior motives, no hidden agendas. In fact, she was convinced that the white-haired detective would be delighted with her proposal. You see, Koshimai had been tirelessly striving to expand the social circle of her friend, whose interactions with the outside world were strictly limited to her work. This endeavor, however, was a far cry from the "unnecessary meddling" that her superiors found so baffling when she had introduced Ms. Kyoko to them. It was a genuine act of kindness.

("Well, I suppose it's a way of expressing my gratitude for all the help she's given me.")

For once, Koshimai wanted Ms. Kyoko to think, "I'm glad I'm friends with Inspector Koshimai." Though, in reality, Ms. Kyoko probably didn't even consider Koshimai a friend. And even if she did, that memory, like all others, would be reset by the next day. But Koshimai remained blissfully unaware of this complicated dynamic.

"Being able to become friends again and again is the best, isn't it?" she thought to herself.

And so, with a cheerful disposition, Inspector Koshimai declared, "Next month, the police station I'm assigned to is hosting a local field day, Ms. Kyoko."

Even for the "Fastest Detective," whose mind was as sharp as a tack and whose profession relied on her ability to process information at lightning speed, it seemed that grasping the full picture from such a vague statement was a challenge. Sipping her self-brewed black coffee, Ms. Kyoko simply nodded in response to her client's opening remark.

"A field day?" she echoed, her tone neutral, maintaining a wait-and-see stance. "Is it like the ones held at elementary schools?"

"Yes, precisely. Not a political demonstration or anything of that sort."

"That's a relief."

"Well, it's basically an event for children to have fun. Like a daytime festival, you could say. People keep saying kids these days don't play outside anymore, but then again, the good old vacant lots where they used to play are disappearing, aren't they? So, we're working with local neighborhood associations to provide them with a place where they can."

"That's wonderful. It shows that crime investigation isn't the only job of the police. If your duty is to protect the safety of the citizens, then you mustn't neglect their mental and physical well-being either."

Ms. Kyoko remarked, nodding in agreement.

"And since it's organized by the police station, rather than an educational institution, the children will feel more at ease and able to really enjoy themselves," she added.

"That's exactly what I was hoping you'd say."

"Of course. As a detective, I too am dedicated to contributing to society and making the world a better place."

She then tilted her head slightly,

"So, what does this have to do with me? You did mention on the phone that this was a work request... You don't want me to participate in the sprint as a guest of honor, do you? I'm not particularly athletic, you see."

"You're too modest."

Although the cases Koshimai brought to her were often solved on the spot, earning Ms. Kyoko, the Forgetful Detective, the title of an "armchair detective," she was, in essence, an active detective. Rumor had it that she possessed boundless energy and traveled far and wide in pursuit of the truth.

She could win a gold medal in side-stepping, that's for sure.

However, Koshimai's request had nothing to do with inviting the renowned detective as a guest, let alone a guest of honor.

"We've already arranged for a Hollywood power couple to be the guests of honor at the field day. I pulled some strings with my connections."

"Did you clear that with their agent? I wouldn't want to be asked to resolve a legal dispute later on."

"Oh, no, no, no. Absolutely not! What I wanted to ask of you, Ms. Kyoko, is... well, it doesn't necessarily involve solving a mystery, if that's alright?"

"Of course. While I enjoy using my head, it's not my only strength. My job is to fulfill all of humanity's missions."

"That's good to know."

Inspector Koshimai continued,

"So, you'll be pleased to hear my request for today."

"Your request for today? Since today is the only day that exists for me, I suppose this would be your first request. What is it?"

"We're short on funds for the field day, so I was hoping that you, Ms. Kyoko, would be willing to make a donation."

"A... a donation?"

Ms. Kyoko stammered, her eyes widening in astonishment, her expression mirroring that of someone who had just witnessed an elaborate disappearing-corpse trick. Even the Forgetful Detective, who usually remained unfazed by anything, who would calmly declare, "It'll be gone from my memory tomorrow anyway," even in the face of the most gruesome crime scenes, was rendered speechless by Koshimai's request. For some reason, Ms. Kyoko seemed utterly bewildered.

Perhaps I should elaborate a little further, Koshimai thought to herself.

"Initially, the project was aimed at providing support for children from single-parent families, and we were managing with the station's budget. But thankfully, the event has grown larger over the years, and we've started seeking volunteers and donations. I know you're a very busy detective, Ms. Kyoko, so I thought it would be more appropriate to ask for a donation rather than your participation as a staff member or guest. I didn't want to burden you."

"My... my precious money... a donation?"

Ms. Kyoko mumbled, her body trembling as if the mere thought was too horrifying to bear. She wrapped her arms around herself, struggling to breathe.

Koshimai, however, misinterpreted Ms. Kyoko's reaction as overwhelming joy. Finally, she had managed to do something nice for Ms. Kyoko! She allowed herself a moment of satisfaction. Ah, it felt good to bring happiness to her beloved Ms. Kyoko.

"D-Do you bear some grudge against me that I've forgotten...? Did I perhaps wipe out your entire family?"

"Don't be ridiculous! As you yourself said earlier, contributing to society is our duty as human beings. Just imagine the children's smiling faces. Doesn't it warm your heart?"

"Y-Yes, you're right. It does."

She reached for her coffee cup, as if seeking solace in its warmth, but then, as if realizing that handling liquids with shaky hands was unwise, she slowly retracted her arm.

"Excuse me, can I lie down for a bit? I'd like to forget my careless words just now."

"Hahaha, you're such a kidder! A joke only the wealthy could make."

"Wealthy..."

Thinking she couldn’t claim not to be wealthy while living in a three-story building that serves as both office and home, Ms. Kyoko refrained from making a rebuttal. After all, saying she spent a lot on fashion items wouldn’t be a good excuse compared to the spirit of volunteering.

"B-but, while it's all well and good to say that charity begins at home, what about you, Inspector Koshimai? What kind of contribution are you making to this local field day?"

Ms. Kyoko inquired, her eyes narrowed, as if suspecting that Koshimai was trying to get away with making her, and only her, bear the financial burden. Koshimai, who was not just part of the organizing committee but a key member of the team that had initiated the project, replied honestly,

"I make it a point to donate ten percent of my salary to charity on a regular basis. But this is a special event, separate from my daily life. So, on top of that, I'm donating an additional fifteen percent."

She could have easily inflated the figure to impress the supposedly wealthy Ms. Kyoko, but she knew better than to lie to a detective. Ms. Kyoko would see right through her.

"F-Fifteen percent? So, a total of twenty-five percent? Won't such a drastic act of self-sacrifice leave you unable to support yourself?"

"Drastic act of self-sacrifice? Hahaha, you're really laying it on thick with the rich-person jokes! That's just the standard sales tax in Norway, a welfare state. But don't worry, I've been setting aside savings specifically for donations."

"Savings for donations?"

She was once again on the verge of leaping from the sofa, but she managed to restrain herself, her internal struggle to maintain her composure evident.

She couldn’t react like an audience shocked by the revelation of a case's truth.

"Well, well, while I call it savings, it's a mere pittance compared to the amount you'll be donating this time. Speaking of which, Ms. Kyoko, I know you don't expect anything in return, but we do have embroidered cheering flags based on the donation amount! It’s presumptuous of me, but I've already ordered the largest size with a silver embroidery of 'Okitegami Detective Agency'!"

"P-Presumptuous indeed..."

Ms. Kyoko murmured, her head bowed, as if unable to believe that she was being asked to pay for accepting a case. Inspector Koshimai, oblivious to Ms. Kyoko's distress, was filled with the joy of having done something nice for her friend. "You're a lifesaver, truly," she said, expressing her gratitude.

"Between you and me, there was a chance this year's field day wouldn't happen. Last year, there was an unfortunate incident during the event, and it became difficult to secure large donations. But thanks to your selfless generosity, Ms. Kyoko, it looks like we'll be alright."

"Yes, such selflessness is hard to come by—though I can't say I empathize with it at all."

Ms. Kyoko muttered under her breath. But then, as if regaining her composure, she raised her head.

"An incident, you say?"

She adjusted her glasses, running her fingers through her white hair.

"So, you're saying that because of this incident, my property rights were violated?"

"? Well, yes..."

“Oops, I misspoke.”

She shouldn't have let that slip, even if she did say it was between them. Ideally, she shouldn't be discussing this with anyone, not even this year's major donor—after all, the incident involved last year's major donor.

Koshimai tried to gloss over it, but Ms. Kyoko wouldn't back down.

"No, please, do tell me. Especially if it turns out I'll be compensating for their donation."

It seemed the word "incident" had triggered Ms. Kyoko's "detective mode"—no, more than a detective, her eagerness to learn more, leaning forward in her seat, made her resemble a vengeful spirit seeking retribution before her memory reset.

3

"To be frank, a ring went missing."

Koshimai began reluctantly—it was an embarrassing scandal that she would have preferred to keep under wraps, a theft occurring at a police-sponsored event. But then again, she thought, covering up such an incident was unbecoming of a police-sponsored event, especially one based on volunteerism.

Especially since it was a volunteer-driven event—if Ms. Kyoko harbored any resentment towards the victim, the donor, then that misunderstanding had to be cleared.

(Well, I'm sure it's just another one of her rich-people jokes. Though it is rather amusing, the way she said it.)

"You know the game 'Borrowing Race,' right? During the race, each runner is handed an envelope. Inside is the name of an item they have to borrow from the spectators or organizers cheering them on. They then have to get to the finish line with the borrowed item."

"I've never participated or watched one, but I'm familiar with the concept."

She might simply have forgotten, Koshimai mused. It was a well-known game, though rarely held, admittedly.

While it was called a competition or a race, it was ultimately a form of entertainment, a game—not something you'd see often at school field days, was it?

As adults, we learn the hard way that "borrowing from others" is a skill far more important than athletic ability, but surely this game wasn't designed to teach that.

In retrospect, it probably shouldn't have been included even in a volunteer event—it was chosen because its playful nature seemed fitting, but in hindsight, the potential for an incident like this was easily foreseeable.

"So, you're saying that amidst the chaos of this Borrowing Race, a ring, which was the 'borrowed item,' went missing—or rather, was stolen?"

"Yes, as expected of Ms. Kyoko, your mind is as sharp as ever. You see right through me."

"Not at all, I'm still inexperienced. If only I had seen through you sooner..."

"It was the ring of a wealthy lady who was a major donor. Not only did she contribute financially, but she and her husband also volunteered as event staff... When a child came running up to her, she was shown a slip of paper that said 'ring,' and the lady gladly handed it over—but it was never returned."

Amidst the chaos of the race.

Koshimai couldn't tell how much of that Ms. Kyoko had gleaned from her explanation, but it was rare to find such a fitting description.

"Wouldn't it be easy to find out what happened by asking the child who borrowed it?"

"That's just it, we can't identify the child. It was a game with a lot of participants, all mixed together. To be honest, we're not even sure if the child was a registered participant."

"...So, it's possible the instruction note was a fake, and the child was the actual thief?"

"Or, perhaps only the envelope was prepared in advance, and the child was a legitimate participant. A manipulated crime, so to speak. A phantom thief disguised as staff could have taken the ring from the child, who was simply following instructions, and disappeared."

Most of the event staff were volunteers.

Since it was a goodwill event, individual background checks weren't exactly rigorous. They couldn't completely rule out the possibility that a criminal element had slipped in.

"It’s unforgivable to use a child in a crime, isn’t it, Ms. Kyoko."

"Indeed, it is."

However, despite her wholehearted agreement, she seemed distracted—as if something else was bothering her.

"So, because of this incident, the wealthy lady is hesitant to donate again this year?"

"Yes, hesitant is putting it mildly. She flat-out refused. And who can blame her?"

It wouldn't have been surprising if she had sued them for negligence—they should be grateful she hadn't. Of course, the lady probably didn't want to sue an organization she had volunteered for, but that didn't mean she was happy about it.

"Hmm, it was careless of her to hand over an expensive ring to a child. Even if she's not as careless as I was."

"You, careless? Come on, there's nothing careless about you, Ms. Kyoko."

"I suppose you could say so."

"Besides, it's not entirely the lady's fault. Of course, it wasn't a cheap ring, but it wasn't particularly expensive for her either."

"? Well, not to be a stickler, but wouldn't it be best if she donated again this year? It might cause trouble for people who have nothing to do with it."

"If you mean us people in the event, we understand her struggle, Ms. Kyoko. Even if it's not expensive, things can hold sentimental value, you know?"

"Do they? Such things?"

"Of course they do, like mementos or keepsakes."

Koshimai countered Ms. Kyoko's statement, which seemed to imply that monetary value was everything—that said, it wasn't as if the wealthy lady was entirely blameless for handing over something of sentimental value in the heat of the moment.

"And rings, especially, are the epitome of sentimental value. You adjust the size and wear them for life. Like a wedding ring, for example."

"Wedding ring."

Ms. Kyoko repeated.

"Was the missing ring a wedding ring?"

"Hmm... now that you mention it, I believe it was..."

What was it again? Ah, yes, that's right.

Since it hadn't become a police case, no formal investigation was conducted. However, when Koshimai had questioned the wealthy lady, she had said that the slip of paper the child had shown her didn't just say "ring," it specifically said "wedding ring."

It had been a hectic race, and the lady's memory of the child was hazy. She wasn't even sure if it was a boy or a girl (she had described the child as a "tomboyish girl"). However, she was certain about the instruction on the note—wedding ring.

"So, if there is an actual thief, they deliberately targeted a wedding ring instead of other jewelry? And a relatively inexpensive one, at that, among the lady's possessions."

"Y-yes—well..."

Now that Ms. Kyoko mentioned it, it was rather strange.

Though the inspector defended her earlier, there's no denying her carefree nature—if someone asked to 'borrow' her other rings, necklaces, designer handbags, or even more directly, her wallet or credit cards, this leisurely lady might just hand them over without a second thought.

So why target the wedding ring specifically?

In the end, was it just a simple case of someone misplacing it amidst the chaos? Perhaps the child who borrowed the ring dropped it immediately and, afraid of being scolded, stayed silent. Or maybe the staff member who received the ring at the finish line also dropped it and, similarly fearing reprimand, kept quiet.

"Speaking of 'afraid of being scolded,' there's one more possibility."

"One more possibility?"

"What if the wealthy lady herself lost her precious wedding ring somewhere else entirely, due to her own negligence, and concocted this story about losing it at the volunteer field day, a place where it would be difficult to criticize her? Afraid of being scolded, of course."

"..."

Well... personally knowing the lady in question, Koshimai found that scenario hard to believe. However, considering the exhaustive net of Ms. Kyoko's deductions, it wasn't a possibility they could ignore.

The incident itself being a fabrication.

There was no child who approached the lady, hence the vague description of the supposed borrower—the fact that the lady even vaguely testified about the child's gender, perhaps to avoid any wrongful accusations, lent a certain credibility to this hypothesis.

The fact that only the content of the instruction note was clear could also point towards a staged act. While Koshimai hadn't found it odd until Ms. Kyoko pointed it out, it was a strange request indeed.

It was questionable whether a participating child would even understand the significance of a 'wedding ring.' And if the person asked to lend it happened to be unmarried, it could have led to a different kind of awkward situation—even among married couples, many would hesitate to lend such a personal item, regardless of its monetary value.

Come to think of it, even having 'ring' as an instruction in a borrowing race was odd—unless it was specified as a 'toy ring.'

The management of that aspect had also been unclear, but if Koshimai were in charge of writing instructions on the slips, she would at least avoid jewelry.

If they were considering the possibility of a planted fake slip, they should have also considered the possibility that such a slip never existed in the first place—however...

"...But if it was all a charade, wouldn't she still have made this year's donation? If she stopped donating, it would risk us continuing the investigation to find the culprit—"

Koshimai argued, though even she found it a weak defense.

In reality, there was no active search for a culprit—Koshimai's approach was to "find other major donors." Even if the lady had staged the ring's disappearance, it made sense for her to withdraw her donation to make her act more convincing.

"Hmm, in that case..."

Ms. Kyoko was seemingly convinced by Koshimai's weak defense. But instead of dropping the matter, she proposed yet another hypothesis, a different pattern altogether.

"Perhaps there's one more person who was 'afraid of being scolded' for losing the ring."

4

It wasn't a shocking revelation. The person Ms. Kyoko pointed to as the 'true culprit' was a rather obvious choice.

The wealthy lady's spouse.

"You mentioned they participated as a 'couple,' right? Wouldn't it have been possible for the wealthy monsieur to slip in a fake instruction note, receive the borrowed item at the finish line, or even more directly, recruit a specific child as a spy and send them to his wife?"

"Wealthy monsieur"—what a strange term. But putting that aside, it was certainly possible. Just like any other man or woman, young or old, present at the field day, he too had the means to do it.

But why?

"Because he 'lost the ring' and was 'afraid of being scolded'—his own wedding ring, that is."

"Ah."

As an unmarried woman, it took Koshimai a moment to grasp the implication. But indeed, unlike engagement rings, wedding rings usually came in pairs—one for the wife and one for the husband. In some cases, they were almost identical, differing only in size, with completely unified designs. And even the size could be adjusted later to ensure a lifetime fit.

It wasn't just any personal memento; it was a shared one, a symbol of their bond. What if the 'wealthy monsieur' had 'lost' this precious wedding ring 'somewhere else entirely,' due to his 'own negligence,' and decided to cover it up by claiming it was lost at the volunteer field day, a place where it would be difficult to criticize him?—And to top it off, losing his partner's ring, not his own.

In other words, he stole his wife's ring to replace his own, not to sell, but to keep as a memento. Koshimai barely knew the lady's husband, but depending on his build, he might not even need to resize it. He could simply slip his wife's ring onto his own finger, saving himself the trouble of hiding it. It was prejudiced to assume that men's ring fingers were universally thicker than women's...

He stole his wife's ring and created a narrative where she was the one who carelessly lost it—what a twisted borrowing race.

"Afraid of being scolded—I can't fathom how terrified of his wife he must be to resort to such a foolish crime."

"You speak as if you know a lot about marital relationships. Could it be that you have experience with marriage, Ms. Kyoko?"

Koshimai couldn't help but retort with a hint of sarcasm.
Unfazed, Ms. Kyoko replied with a straight face, "It’s possible, given it’s me, though I don't remember."

As they say, let sleeping dogs lie, and let detectives stay out of marital disputes.

"Don't get me wrong. I, more than anyone, hope this hypothesis is way off base. Because if this is the truth, I doubt the lady who refused the donation will change her mind. Well, I must say, paying to present a deduction is a rather peculiar experience for the Forgetful Detective, but I suppose it was good exercise. Mental exercise, I mean."

メフィスト

KODANSHA NOVELS
講談社ノベルス

2019 VOL.2

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道尾秀介　野崎まど　中山七里

マンガ――喜国雅彦　玉川重機

Kyoko Okitegami’s Sleepover (Mephisto 2019 Vol. 2)

Let’s Have a Pajama Party with

Ms. Kyoko, the Forgetful Detective!?

What mysteries color the sleepless night?

1

Inspector Koshimai was convinced that the time had come to take her relationship with the Forgetful Detective to the next level—of course, some might say they were already best friends, having faced countless trials together. They might question what more Koshimai could want and accuse her of being overly cautious. However, the modest Inspector Koshimai couldn't help but wonder, could they truly call themselves friends if they hadn't even had a sleepover at each other's places? Was it okay for her to be clueless about what kind of loungewear and pajamas her best friend wore? Sure, she saw Ms. Kyoko's everyday outfits, but that was like judging a book by its cover. As her closest confidante, Koshimai felt an insatiable need to know what kind of pajamas the fashionable Ms. Kyoko donned for bed. To not know felt like a crime.

She yearned to delve into the private life of the silver-haired detective.

In fact, driven by this burning curiosity, Inspector Koshimai had deepened her friendships with nearly a thousand acquaintances in a similar fashion. Whenever she found someone intriguing, she'd insist on a sleepover at their place. She became quite adept at manipulating her friends into agreeing, expertly dismantling their flimsy excuses like "I live too far," "My place is messy," "I live with my parents," "I live with my boyfriend," "We're different genders," "I have three kids," or "I prefer to keep my online friendships online"—she'd successfully infiltrated and nestled herself into all sorts of homes, even once staying at a promising career bureaucrat's house for almost half a year. It was practically a homestay at that point. Although, she hadn't anticipated becoming closer to his wife than him... Recently, Koshimai had even been invited to lecture at a seminar on "Preventing Burglaries"—as if she were a reformed thief or something!

And so, Inspector Koshimai decided to pay a visit to Ms. Kyoko's residence and office, the Okitegami Building. Of course, she'd been there countless times before, both as a client and a friend. But this time, her intentions ran deeper.

Her determination was different this time.

She was going to spend the night. She had even brought her overnight bag, packed with two sets of pajamas-–a negligee and a babydoll—just in case she ended up staying longer. She didn't want Ms. Kyoko to think she had a childish taste.

(...Of course, I haven't forgotten.)

Koshimai hadn't forgotten—that Ms. Kyoko, on the other hand, forgot everything.

Being the Forgetful Detective meant that Ms. Kyoko lost all her memories each day. This included, unfortunately, any memory of Koshimai being her best and dearest friend.

It was a tragedy that she forgot their friendship.

However, Koshimai believed that this forgetfulness meant she had to work even harder to engrave their bond into her own memory. She saw it as an opportunity—every "Nice to meet you" only strengthened their connection.

After all, expecting something in return was not the foundation of true friendship. It didn't matter how the other person felt; all that mattered was the love she held in her own heart. Koshimai approached each day as a time-trial challenge, striving to break through Ms. Kyoko's walls and earn her affection within the limited time frame. It was like playing a roguelike computer game—the thrill of starting from level one and navigating a different dungeon every time they met was part of Ms. Kyoko's charm.

Those who didn't understand this chose to keep their distance from the Forgetful Detective. But not Koshimai. She prided herself on being a true connoisseur of friendship, embodying its essence day in and day out.

Therefore, the fact that Ms. Kyoko, the Forgetful Detective, had no recollection of their friendship—how she always treated Koshimai as a first-time client—was of no consequence. It didn't even warrant a second thought.

Nevertheless, Ms. Kyoko's forgetfulness did present a slight obstacle to Koshimai's sleepover plan, which would normally be a natural progression in their friendship. Based on past experiences, Koshimai knew Ms. Kyoko would undoubtedly try to usher her out of the building come bedtime.

"Oh my, I've kept you here for far too long! Let me show you to the door," Ms. Kyoko would say with a playful yet dismissive tone. Koshimai had lost count of how many times she had heard those words.

Usually, Koshimai would counter by suggesting drinks and staying until the last train had left. However, this tactic wouldn't work this time.

Her opponent was, after all, the Forgetful Detective—the fastest detective alive.

It wasn't like she hadn't attempted to extend her stay at the Okitegami Building before. There were days when she just knew a sleepover was inevitable.

That usually meant the unsolved case brought in by the client was a real tough nut to crack, something that wouldn't be solved easily. She used to get excited about the idea of working overtime on such a tough case, thinking, 'Of course, we'll have to stay up all night for this!' But then, to her surprise, Ms. Kyoko solved the case in just a few hours.

The fastest detective indeed.

Because her memory reset every day, Ms. Kyoko made it a point to solve every case within a single day. While this was a reassuring trait from a police perspective (especially considering the built-in confidentiality of forgetting everything), it posed a significant challenge for a best friend hoping for a pajama party.

No matter how hard Koshimai tried to prolong their interactions, Ms. Kyoko would always end things abruptly. It was truly remarkable—Koshimai wasn't even allowed to stay for after-work drinks! What a dream work-life balance Ms. Kyoko had.

However, Inspector Koshimai wasn't known as the "Ever-Persistent Pal" for nothing. While she would have preferred that title to be associated with her investigative work, she knew that if standard procedures failed, she simply had to devise new ones. If one hand didn't work, she'd use another. And if that failed, she had plenty more hands up her sleeve.

She would find a way to spend the night at the Okitegami Building, even if it meant resorting to unconventional tactics. She would cook a delicious meal, create a fun and inviting atmosphere, and finally uncover the secrets of Ms. Kyoko's pajamas.

And if she was lucky, maybe, just maybe, she could even convince Ms. Kyoko to try on her babydoll pajamas. But that might be too forward, even for someone as self-proclaimed humble as Inspector Koshimai.

2

"What?! You're telling me you're just about to start reading Mr. Hirubei Sunaga's books and you want recommendations?! Why didn't you say so sooner, Inspector Koshimai?! Come, let me brew us some fresh coffee. I have some excellent fair-trade beans I bought this morning! And would you like some chocolate with that?"

...Ms. Kyoko's excitement was almost alarming.

Koshimai had been visiting the Okitegami Building for quite some time now, but this was the first time chocolate had ever been offered. Even a second cup of coffee was a rare treat for her.

It seemed the rumors were true after all.

Koshimai had heard whispers through her own channels, but she had honestly doubted their validity. However, seeing was believing—Ms. Kyoko Okitegami, the Forgetful Detective, was actually a diehard fan of the renowned mystery novelist Hirubei Sunaga. Apparently, she would gladly forgo sleep to devour his books.

Hirubei Sunaga.

Even the outdoorsy Inspector Koshimai knew that name. His novels had been adapted into popular dramas and movies, and she'd seen the manga adaptations lining bookstore shelves.

However, she hadn't actually read any of his work. Instead of pretending to be familiar with his books and offering half-baked opinions, Koshimai decided to play the role of the eager student. She would approach Ms. Kyoko with genuine curiosity and let the expert enlighten her. This tactic seemed to work better than expected. Ms. Kyoko, who had already solved Koshimai's "unsolvable" case in minutes instead of hours, seemed a tad disappointed by the lack of a challenge. But the moment she heard Sunaga's name, her eyes lit up behind her glasses, her demeanor shifting to one of pure enthusiasm.

"You want a recommendation? Oh my, that's a tough one. All of his works are so brilliant, they're interesting no matter where you start. But I wouldn't want to suggest something too highbrow and scare you off. Mr. Sunaga's writing is meant to be enjoyed by everyone, so finding the one book that embodies that... well, it's a challenge, to say the least. He has so many masterpieces, it's almost as if they belong to the entire Japanese literary world, not just him. I can't help but want to recommend the ones that spark discussion, but for a first-timer, enjoyment should be the priority, wouldn't you agree?"

Hmm.

As expected, this conversation might take a while.

At this rate, she'd be talking until dawn, let alone the last train. Koshimai had purposely scheduled their meeting for the late hour of 8 p.m. and even arrived slightly late, but it seemed those little tricks were unnecessary.

"How about 'The Victim of Mine Eye'? Although, on second thought, that might not be the best fit for Inspector Koshimai. You see, as a police officer..." Ms. Kyoko paused. "Oh dear, that would be a spoiler, wouldn't it? Let's just pretend I didn't say anything. In that case, 'The Chest is Above the Stomach' is another strong contender, but I can't say for sure if it's the right choice. By the way, do you mind starting a series midway through? One of the greatest things about the great Mr. Sunaga is that his books, even those in a series, can be enjoyed in any order. However, as a fan, I can't help but feel that they should be read in order, ideally alongside Mr. Sunaga's own writing journey. Don't you agree? Focusing on the book in front of you allows for a richer experience. Still, I envy you, being able to experience Mr. Sunaga's work for the first time. I wish I could forget everything and read them all again with a fresh perspective."

Koshimai had heard that sentiment often, but wasn't it something Ms. Kyoko said every day because she was the Forgetful Detective? Or did she forget that she forgot?

"Do you prefer thick books or thin ones? There's a certain indulgence in the feeling of devouring a hefty novel, but a sparkling short story offers a different kind of luxury. I know 'cost-performance' is a term that should never be used when discussing literature, but that guilty pleasure of thinking, 'I can't believe I'm enjoying this so much after only ten pages!' is part of what makes reading so appealing. While Mr. Sunaga is widely regarded as a mystery writer, and I wouldn't disagree, he's also written quite a few works bordering on science fiction and fantasy. Those might be easier for beginners to get into. Have you ever tried juvenile fiction? You seem like a mature person, Inspector Koshimai, so perhaps it's not your usual genre, but it can be surprisingly profound."

Mature, huh?

This was the first time she'd been complimented like that.

Koshimai was starting to feel overwhelmed—and a little unprepared. While her lack of preparation was intentional, she hadn't anticipated that she'd be discussing novels, let alone Hirubei Sunaga's work, with someone who seemed to be his biggest fan. It would be a disaster if Ms. Kyoko found out that Koshimai had barely read any novels, let alone those by Sunaga.

Wasn't it like saying that mystery, science fiction, and fantasy were all like juvenile literature? Koshimai knew better than to ask such a naive question out loud.

At this rate, their sleepover was turning into a reading session, but Koshimai supposed that wasn't too far off from her original objective. Perhaps she should have at least watched the movie adaptations as a form of preparation. However, to truly experience Ms. Kyoko's passion firsthand, it was probably better to go in blind.

"Honestly, I'm completely lost. Just tell me your absolute favorite work, Ms. Kyoko"

"I love all of them. Every single word of every single book."

Her serious expression only made it harder for Koshimai to argue.

She was starting to feel jealous of the mystery novelist. Though he was the reason she might get to spend the night with Ms. Kyoko, so she should be grateful.

"But I'm sure you'll read them all eventually, Inspector Koshimai."

"Huh?"

"After all, the first book is always special, a memory to cherish. We should aim for the best possible choice. Oh, I know! There's a Mr. Sunaga book recommendation divination!"

"A book... divination?"

"You know, like the Sorting Hat ceremony at Hogwarts? It determines the perfect book for you."

Leave it to Ms. Kyoko to explain a novel with another novel—still, it was easy enough to understand.

Even the outdoorsy Inspector Koshimai had read the entire Harry Potter series—although, her gateway was the Broadway play, which was a bit unusual.

"Do I have to wear a hat?"

"Not at all. Although, I do have a beret in my wardrobe that would look lovely on you. I'll give it to you later."

That was just too much.

Koshimai was going to die of happiness.

"There is a 'problem section' of a mystery novel that Mr. Sunaga published in a literary magazine. The way you solve it determines the perfect book for you. It's like a reading personality test, a playful experiment only possible with an author as prolific as Mr. Sunaga—how about it? Want to give it a try?"

So, it was more of a psychological test than a divination. Like those quizzes that asked, "What writing tool would you use to draw a picture in the sky? 1. Colored pencils, 2. Markers, 3. Ink brush, 4. Your finger." The chosen option supposedly revealed something about the test taker's personality. As a police officer, Koshimai was familiar with analyzing the psychology of apprehended criminals using tools like the Rorschach or Baum Test, so she couldn't dismiss this as mere child's play.

Besides, it reminded her of the games she used to play with her classmates—there was no reason to refuse. As a police officer, she had nothing to hide.

A sound mind in a sound body, as they say.

"So, it's like a recommendation algorithm. If you liked this, you might also like this."

"Recommendation algorithm? What's that?"

"Well..."

Had she forgotten?

Maybe she knew yesterday, but it had been a day.

"But wouldn't that mean you'd end up reading that specific novel anyway? Regardless of whether it's that 'problem' or not?

"Yes. That's why I'll explain the outline of the story to you. It was originally a short story, and I'll only be covering the first half, so it'll be quick.

"Alright—uh, since it's a mystery 'problem,' I assume I have to identify the culprit?"

"It's not about identifying the culprit. If anything, it's closer to science fiction. It's quite peculiar, to say the least."

"Interesting."

"Inspector Koshimai, are you familiar with AI and big data?"

Well, of course.

Probably more than today's Ms. Kyoko, at least.

3

“Long ago…

"Not that long ago, actually. This is a story about the near future.

"In a certain law-abiding nation, a proposal was put forth to mechanize criminal investigation. While brilliant detectives and inspectors were all well and good, their responses to criminals were always reactive. This proposal aimed to address that very issue.

"It's something people have been saying for a long time—what good are famous detectives and inspectors if they can't bring the victims back to life, even after they've uncovered the truth and apprehended the perpetrator?

"It's like saying 'I knew who the culprit was from the beginning' after the fact, it's a bit of a stretch, isn't it—what?

“No? I’ve never said such a thing myself, have I? I don’t remember at all. Don’t blame me just because I’m forgetful.

"Anyway, as I was saying, the point is that a true detective, a true inspector, should be able to prevent crimes before they happen. And some politicians were quite vocal about how this wasn't being achieved... although, if I may digress, we do have our side of the story.

"In reality, police officers prevent a significant number of crimes through patrols, security measures, and questioning suspicious individuals. And renowned detectives often solve cases before criminals can commit more serious offenses."

"I wish people would put aside their preconceived notions, take a closer look at our work, and give us the credit we deserve. But I digress again...

"And so, the 'mechanical detective' was invented.

"You could say it's like a judge. Input a person's data, and it determines whether they'll commit a crime in the future—a machine that frequently appears in science fiction novels.

"Dystopian, isn't it?

"Input the data of every citizen, run the calculations, and essentially, you have a crime prediction system—if you know a crime is going to happen, you can prevent it beforehand, right? You can warn potential offenders in advance, and as an added bonus, you could even prevent suicides and accidents.

"If such a machine were invented in reality, Inspector Koshimai and I would be out of a job. It would certainly spark a debate—like, where do we draw the line between security cameras and surveillance cameras?

"It's about privacy.

"It's like the difference between a GPS tracker on a parolee's ankle and a child safety GPS. Speaking of children, I learned something interesting while solving a case earlier today. Apparently, there's a school of thought that encourages children to greet suspicious individuals on purpose.

"As a renowned detective, even I'm surprised by such a counterintuitive approach. But I suppose such bold communication might actually make the suspicious person less suspicious—that being said, in today's case, a child was kidnapped after initiating such a greeting.

"As for the outcome of that case, and whether I was able to prevent a tragedy, well, that falls under the privacy and confidentiality agreement of the Forgetful Detective. It's a secret for now, and tomorrow, I'll forget all about it.

"This is just one example of how crime prevention measures, while still in their experimental phase, can be difficult to implement. Even with security cameras, some criminals use them to their advantage, deliberately appearing on camera to create an alibi. It's a painful game of cat and mouse.

"So, did this mechanical detective create a law-abiding dystopia? Well, it didn't quite work out that way. In fact, it was a complete failure. You could say the outcome was the polar opposite of what the politicians who planned it had envisioned for the future—now then...

"Why did the mechanical detective fail?

"Ten seconds to answer."

4

Ten seconds!?

Even if she suddenly gave her a time limit... Koshimai wasn't the fastest detective around. In fact, she had intended to spend the entire night pondering the answer, just as Ms. Kyoko had initially suggested. To be suddenly hit with a time constraint at the very end was unsettling, to say the least.

Still, if this was a psychological test, then she was supposed to answer instinctively. Overthinking it would lead to analyzing the examiner's intent, in this case, the author's thoughts, and that would defeat the purpose of the exercise.

(A mechanical detective—it's a classic sci-fi trope.)

Koshimai had seen several movies with that theme, and in every single one, society had devolved into a dystopia. Of course, filmmakers, with their belief in freedom of expression, wouldn't portray a surveillance state positively... but she needed to set aside those preconceived notions for now.

Like the Forgetful Detective, she needed to approach this with a fresh perspective.

It was unclear how much Ms. Kyoko, with her inability to retain memories, actually grasped, but AI development and the creation of mechanical detectives—essentially, the automation of a detective's intuition—were progressing rapidly.

Facial recognition technology that identified pre-registered suspicious individuals was already relatively commonplace. Data analysis that could interpret criminal intent from a person's gait or shoulder movements was also being actively developed. Perhaps in the future, genetic testing and brain scans would be used to predict a person's likelihood of committing a crime. It was

strange how judging someone based on their appearance would be considered prejudice if done by a human, but somehow became progressive when done by a machine.

"Are there any multiple-choice options? Like, 1. There was a bug in the system, or 2. The operator acted maliciously?"

"No. Would either of those be your answer?"

"N-no, please give me a little more time to think."

"Five more seconds then. Consider it a bonus."

Thank goodness for the kinder, gentler version of Ms. Kyoko—but well, ultimately, it felt like any answer would be the same, with no right or wrong solution. But Koshimai wanted to at least try to figure it out. She wouldn't have considered staying at the Okitegami Building if she didn't possess that much of a challenging spirit.

To borrow a page from the Forgetful Detective's playbook, this called for deductive reasoning. Besides the two possibilities she had already mentioned, what other failures could she think of? Incorrect data input would fall under the first option...

Think about it the other way around.

What would happen if we prevent crimes before they occur?

While seemingly ideal, it would undoubtedly lead to a stifling society... and the issue of wrongful accusations. Before even considering system bugs, malicious operators, or human error, wasn't it already a form of false accusation to suspect someone of a crime they haven't committed simply because they seemed "likely" to do it? Being judged for a crime you haven't committed was unacceptable. If someone had a 60% chance of committing a crime, should the remaining 40% be ignored just to "prevent" that crime? Or should they wait until the very last moment before the crime occurs? Besides, drawing a clear line between what constitutes a crime was difficult.

There were acts that were morally reprehensible, or acts that were legal but considered unacceptable by society. The frustration of encountering wrongdoings that couldn't be punished by law wouldn't disappear even with a mechanical detective; if anything, it would become even more pronounced. Forbidding a child from riding a bicycle because they might violate traffic laws seemed to go against the very spirit of the law—while a law enforcement officer saying that might be problematic, the world wasn't without its share of absurd laws. And how would they deal with cases where the law hadn't caught up with reality? For example, new technologies, particularly in the realm of computers, transcended national borders.

Even if the laws of that particular law-abiding nation were upheld, wouldn't it create contradictions with the laws of other countries and international treaties? Would creating new laws simply lead to the dilemma of "dura lex, sed lex"—the law is harsh, but it is the law?

While some might argue that such a system would surely operate with discretion and that she was being too extreme—criminals were known to exploit loopholes and push the boundaries of legality.

But even before considering the law, what about the fundamental nature of life itself – the necessity of consuming other living beings to survive? If that was considered acceptable, then what about pollution? Was pollution also unavoidable? Everyone took the benefits of scientific advancement for granted, but if someone, somewhere, was dying from overwork to fuel that progress, was that also considered acceptable?

Call it a frustrating experience, if you will.

It's hard to imagine a more frustrating system than that.

Perhaps the mechanical detective, having predicted such a future, had shut itself down—as a fictional plot point, it was a clever twist. By destroying itself, it prevented the illegal state of a surveillance society. However, this felt like she was trying too hard to come up with a unique answer.

Trying to be too clever.

While that might be the right approach in a novel, this test was about her subconscious, her gut feeling, not her intellect or reasoning skills.

It was like deliberately drawing a picture of a burning tree in a one-stroke Baum Test—she wasn't trying to be eccentric; that wasn't the point.

Just like in deductive reasoning, this required intuition—the very "detective's hunch" that was being tested. What was the first impression that came to Koshimai's mind when Ms. Kyoko described the story? She wasn't trying to make a social commentary; it was much simpler than either of the two options she had mentioned.

The purpose and futility of preventing crime.

The stark contrast between the envisioned ideal and the actual outcome...

"Ants..."

"Yes?"

"You know... that thing about ants, the social insects? Even if you remove the 20% of ants that are slacking off while the other 80% are working, another 20% of the remaining ants will simply become idle. It's called the 'Worker Ant Theory', and I heard it applies to human society as well, like the 'Pareto Principle'."

The Worker Ant Theory.

The same thing might have happened, Inspector Koshimai voiced her answer.

"In other words, if you eliminate all the criminals, new criminals will emerge from the remaining good citizens in the same proportion. If preventing crime turns people who weren't criminals into criminals, wouldn't that be a far cry from the utopia they envisioned? It's a crime-inducing machine."

Strictly speaking, the same proportion didn't mean the same number.

Even if 20% of the remaining 80% become criminals after removing 20% of the criminals, that's still only 16% of the original 100%. If you remove that 16%, and 20% of the remaining 84% become criminals, it's 12.8% compared to the initial number.

If you keep reducing the percentage in this way, it will eventually approach zero—but it's important to note that the total number will also be approaching zero.

That wouldn't be a functioning society.

Some say that even slacker ants have their role to play, so it's extremely reckless to equate them with criminals. However, it's a fact that there's a tendency in human society to condemn laziness as criminal.

Furthermore, this begs the question: do people without criminal tendencies even exist? Anyone would steal bread or kill if driven to their limits. Poverty breeds crime, and even those with enough food and clothing aren't always virtuous.

If you crack down on those with the highest criminal tendencies, those next in line will simply rise to the top. Eliminating the elite criminals would just create opportunities for the sub-elite.

Moreover, criminals wouldn't simply sit back and be suppressed... They would adapt to this mechanical detective. It's a game of cat and mouse. Speaking of guidance for children, Koshimai had heard about a school that implemented strict anti-bullying measures. They had a zero-tolerance policy, severely punishing bullies and rewarding students who reported bullying. The result? On the surface, it seemed successful, but in some cases, it led to a new form of bullying where former victims were coerced into misbehaving to receive punishment. As a police officer, it makes one wonder... What drives bullies to such lengths? It's a situation that demands careful consideration.

"By that logic, Inspector Koshimai, 80% of inmates in prisons, where criminals are incarcerated, should be rehabilitated. If you gather only the 20% of ants that slack off, 80% of them will start working."

"Hmm... well, yes, I suppose so."

While it depends on the crime, based on the recidivism rate of ex-convicts, it's not far off the mark. However, it's not a fair comparison unless you consider that they're released back into society.

"So, Inspector Koshimai, your answer is, 'No matter how much we try to prevent crime, it's pointless because all humans are potential criminals'? Is that right?"

"Hmm... well..."

That's not quite it, but whatever.

As a police officer who protects citizens, it's a somewhat difficult diagnosis to accept, but if that's the analysis, she might as well use that fortune-telling to her advantage.

That's the point of these psychological tests.

"Then I recommend this book for you! The forty-ninth work by Mr. Hirubei Sunaga, 'Guilt and Innocence: The Reversible Lane'!"

That's a catchy title.

5

Incidentally, the "solution" to that short story didn't seem to be the despair-filled ending Koshimai had imagined. Rather, it offered a glimmer of hope.

The story unfolded as a social satire, which Koshimai had initially dismissed, exploring themes like the nature of crime and whether those who exploit legal loopholes should go unpunished. However, overwhelmed by criticism, the politician who initiated the project, driven to near-nervous breakdown, was deemed "likely to commit wrongdoing" and lost his position. It was then that a young girl posed a question to him:

"Why didn't you try to find good people instead of looking for bad ones?"

With a wealth of personal information and an AI capable of eliminating bias at his disposal, the politician had naturally considered preventing crime. But wasn't that very thought predicated on the assumption that criminals were lurking among them?

Why not search for heroes?

Why not encourage good deeds?

Why not nurture young people who could make the world a better place?

Had they not robbed someone of the opportunity to become a "good person" by constantly watching over them with a critical eye? If you never let someone ride a bicycle, they'll never learn how. Had they not taken away something else by preventing accidents? Growth, for instance.

This machine had taken the jobs of detectives.

But couldn't it have done the opposite?

Couldn't it have nurtured and raised detectives—why had they neglected to discover and cultivate those qualities?

Why slack off? Why be lazy?

There's another way to look at the Worker Ant Theory. The top 20% of the group works as hard as the remaining 80%. And if you remove that top 20%, another 20% of the remaining ants will start working just as hard.

If you repeat this process, eventually everyone in society will become a hard worker—a utopian ideal, perhaps, but it's an undeniable reality that you can't build an ideal society without envisioning an ideal.

That's right.

Anyone can be a detective.

Let's look for detectives, not criminals. The detective within you.

And so, the mechanical detective's role came to an end—or rather, its role changed. It became a machine that impartially, yet warmly, investigated the potential for "good" that resided in every human being.

Another interesting tidbit: the young girl who questioned the politician seemed to have vanished without a trace, no matter how much data was collected.

Their sleepover, or rather, their reading session, ended around 5:00 AM as the sky began to lighten. Or rather, it ended when Ms. Kyoko, who had been excitedly discussing Hirubei Sunaga's writing style just moments before, suddenly slumped onto the sofa like a depleted battery, abruptly ending the night.

She hadn't even seemed sleepy... She dozed off like a child.

Koshimai herself was at her limit.

She wasn't just sleepy.

She was beyond sleepy, and reading in that state was more like an ordeal, a new form of torture. The content of "Guilt and Innocence: The Reversible Lane," the book Ms. Kyoko had recommended, hadn't sunk in at all. She'd lost count of how many times she'd reread the same line on the same page.

On top of that, Ms. Kyoko kept interrupting her.

"How far have you gotten?"

"You're at that part? It gets even better from there!"

"Did you know that line was different in the first edition? Well, of course you wouldn't! I'll tell you later."

"There was an event called 'manuscript search'..."

"They changed some things when they released the paperback edition, and I personally prefer the original version, but to each their own."

"Actually, there's a funny story behind that scene!"

"Shall I share my interpretation?"

With all these distractions, there was no way Koshimai could concentrate—as a novice reader, she wasn't entirely sure, but wasn't reading supposed to be a quiet activity? It was a miracle she hadn't been the first to fall asleep.

Ms. Kyoko probably thought she was being helpful, keeping Koshimai awake, but it made it impossible to immerse herself in the story. From what she'd gathered during their conversation, Ms. Kyoko could easily pull all-nighters if a case (or a good book) demanded it. So that's what she meant when she said she solved all her cases within a day. Had Koshimai known that, she would have approached this sleepover differently. Apparently, the child abduction case Ms. Kyoko had handled earlier that day had been quite action-packed (and the morning shopping

trip seemed to have taken them quite a distance—the coffee beans for the second pot were definitely high quality). Despite her small stature, Ms. Kyoko possessed seemingly boundless energy, but it seemed her parameters had been somewhat depleted, which worked to Koshimai's advantage.

It wasn't quite what she had in mind, but 5:00 AM was still 5:00 AM. Trains weren't just running; they were making their first trips of the day. Koshimai had undeniably achieved her goal of spending the night at Ms. Kyoko's place—she hadn't managed to see Ms. Kyoko in her pajamas, let alone convince her to change into them, but that was a quest for another time.

That said, she couldn't just leave her host passed out on the sofa.

Ms. Kyoko was the Forgetful Detective, her memories resetting every day, or more precisely, every time she slept. When she woke up, she'd have no recollection of this sleepover. Still, Koshimai couldn't let her wake up on the sofa, disoriented and confused. Confused, or rather, ready to launch into a deduction... Koshimai wanted to avoid any unnecessary misunderstandings. Ms. Kyoko didn't look heavy, so Koshimai decided to princess-carry her to bed.

Err, which room was the bedroom?

She couldn't risk accidentally carrying Ms. Kyoko into the room she used as a document archive—Inspector Koshimai might have excelled at waltzing into other people's homes, especially those of her friends, but she was always careful not to invade their privacy. Even when she stepped into their private lives, she never violated their privacy itself. A detective's confidentiality was paramount. Then again, Ms. Kyoko was the Forgetful Detective. Maybe she didn't even have a document archive?

In the end, the recommended book fortune had left a stronger impression than the recommended book itself. Come to think of it, it was quite a meaningless and superficial fortune.

Or rather, it was already an outdated art form.

Koshimai had realized it during their conversation (or rather, Ms. Kyoko's torrent of words unleashed while Koshimai was trying to read). Ms. Kyoko had no idea that her beloved author, Hirubei Sunaga, was deceased—nor was she fully aware of his extensive bibliography, which spanned over a hundred books.

Even Inspector Koshimai, who wasn't a reader by any means, knew that information, that data—which Ms. Kyoko, a supposed avid reader, lacked.

The recommended book fortune was, in that sense, a relic of the past. It couldn't recommend any works published after a certain point in time, specifically, after that so-called "problem" section. It was probably a fortune that had been relevant when Suenaga had only published fifty

or seventy books—regardless of the magazine's intentions, the story was now just a typical sci-fi mystery, a short story.

(And yet...)

There must have been days when Ms. Kyoko knew that her favorite author was dead, days when she had a firm grasp on his entire body of work—she had simply forgotten all those days, every single one.

Ms. Kyoko had innocently mentioned wanting to reread the books she'd forgotten, but Koshimai couldn't help but think—even if Ms. Kyoko forgot, their friendship could still work if Koshimai put in twice the effort.

If Ms. Kyoko forgot today, Koshimai could just visit her again tomorrow—but what if the inspector died?

Inspector Koshimai was a police officer. She worked in a dangerous profession, even in Japan, a country with a top-tier, peaceful society—while she couldn't say she wouldn't die in the line of duty, if she actually did, Ms. Kyoko would never remember her again.

That was... well, a little disheartening.

Even with her usual sunny disposition, that future seemed bleak.

For the Forgetful Detective, forgetting was a weapon—and sometimes, that weapon hurt the people around her.

It kept them at a distance, forever.

(Which means, as her best friend, I have to live a long life, right?)

That was the positive spin Inspector Koshimai, ever the optimist, put on it. But even she, with her sleep-deprived mind, couldn't help but entertain more thoughts—to an extent, troublesome thoughts.

(Hmm, I wonder what "today's" Ms. Kyoko's answer to that problem was, an avid reader as she is?)

Anyone can be a master detective.

Perhaps it was precisely because she was able to pinpoint the plot twist, and say it as if she had "known it from the very beginning," that she became a detective? Staggering along as she pondered these idle thoughts, Koshimai cautiously opened the door to what she assumed was the bedroom, just to be safe.

The room, decorated primarily in white, looked like something out of an interior design magazine. And yes, there was a bed. Perhaps because she was a Forgetful Detective whose memories vanished with sleep, Ms. Kyoko seemed to prioritize a good night's rest. Just like a high-end hotel, there were four pillows on the bed. The bedding looked so comfortable, Koshimai felt tempted to dive in herself, but she restrained herself.

Changing Ms. Kyoko into pajamas was probably taking things too far.

Or was it? As she debated this internally, Koshimai found herself looking up at the ceiling.

To be fair, she had been looking for a wardrobe where Ms. Kyoko's sleepwear might be stored, but such a fixture wouldn't be on the ceiling. So, yes, she was just looking up for no particular reason.

Or perhaps—it was her detective's intuition.

Perhaps years of experience with the Forgetful Detective, the data steadily accumulating, had unconsciously guided Koshimai's gaze upwards. There, on the ceiling where the air conditioner was installed, written in incredibly bold letters, in stark black paint that clashed with the elegant bedroom decor, in a striking hand she wouldn't forget, were these words:

"From today onwards, you are Kyoko Okitegami.

You will live as a detective."

... What the heck is *that*?

メフィスト

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大崎梢——「バスターミナルでコーヒーを」

「掟上今日子の座談会」——西尾維新

〈特別収録〉「新本格魔法少女りすか」第一話＆第十話

「メルカトル・ナイト」——麻耶雄嵩

メフィスト評論賞受賞作一挙掲載

巻末座談会

連載小説——恩田陸　西澤保彦
大倉崇裕

マンガ——喜国雅彦

Kyoko Okitegami’s Symposium (Mephisto 2019 Vol. 3)

The Mephisto Prize Symposium!

Wait, no, this symposium...

Who's in it?

The whole supporting cast is gathered!?

A: "Alright then, let's get started with today's 'Forgetful Detective Symposium'. I, A, will be your host."

B: "Hold on, 'Alright then'? What do you mean 'Alright then'? And 'today's'? This is the first time we've ever gathered like this, isn't it?"

C: "Well, some of us have met before. I, for one, met B in a police holding cell."

B: "H-Hey, Mr. C, don't phrase it like that! You make it sound like I was some hardened criminal in custody!"

D: "He never said you were actually behind bars. That kind of suspicious behavior is exactly why you're known as the 'False Accusations King,' Mr. B."

E: "I doubt Mr. B wants to hear that from you. If Mr. B is the 'False Accusations King,' then you, Mr. D, are the 'False Accusations Factory.'"

D: "Ouch, that stings a little. I'm speechless. As expected of a hotshot journalist, you sure know how to slap on labels."

E: "That's quite the label coming from you. I'm simply working hard to dispel the prejudice that 'information on the internet is unreliable.'"

A: "Now, now, everyone calm down. Let's save the heated debates for other topics. There's a reason I've gathered you all here today."

D: "Well, obviously there's a reason, which I'm sure you'll explain anytime soon. By the way, who are you anyway? You're the organizer, Ms. A, so shouldn't you be the one introducing yourself?"

A: "Indeed. It's true that I'm meeting everyone here for the first time, but that's not a big deal. At least, not for me."

B: "Amazing communication skills. I'm envious."

A: "However, I'll refrain from introducing myself. Given the nature of the topic we'll be discussing in this symposium, I'd like to prioritize anonymity. So please, everyone, don't worry about who each other is. Forget about those endearing titles like 'False Accusations King,' 'False Accusations Factory,' or 'False Accusations Journalist.'"

E: "Who are you calling the 'False Accusations Journalist'?"

C: "That's a title even my employer would find hard to forget."

E: "Employer? Ah, that comment just told me everything I need to know about you, Mr. C. With two suspiciously tall men here, I was starting to wonder if one of you was the other's Jojo Stand."

B: "Jojo Stand? Come on, Ms. E."

C: "I understand the need for anonymity when discussing the Forgetful Detective, but it's also troublesome to be completely in the dark. A, B, C... it's all so impersonal. We could be swapped out mid-discussion, and no one would notice."

A: "It wouldn't do to leave room for a body-double trick, would it? Alright, let's add a little personality to these bland letters. I, A, am here representing Ms. Kyoko's friends."

B: "A friend?"

C: "Ms. Kyoko doesn't have friends, does she?"

A: "She does. I am one."

E: "I think I'm starting to get a sense of Ms. A's personality."

A: "Mr. B, you're here as a representative of her clients. Mr. C, you're here as her... well, I'm not sure what to call you. A representative of her subordinates? Bodyguards? Assistants?"

C: "Honestly, just call me the 'representative of her slaves,' and be done with it. I have no delusions of being some kind of Watson."

A: "Mr. D, you're the police officer representative. And Ms. E, you're the information broker representative."

E: "Information broker? You make it sound like my existence is illegal. You keep making jabs at me."

D: "I'm not important enough to represent the entire police force. And you're a police officer too, Ms. A."

A: "I'm close enough to Ms. Kyoko that I'm not allowed to participate in any investigations concerning her. You could say I've turned in my 'police officer representative' badge. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to call us family."

B: "Mr. D, shouldn't you be arresting this person?"

C: "When the 'False Accusations King' goes and says that, you know it's over."

A: "So, with that said, today, the five of us will be discussing Ms. Kyoko from our respective standpoints. Please, feel free to share your honest opinions."

B: "I'll ask again, what exactly is going on here?"

The Forgetful Detective, Kyoko Okitegami

D: "So, you're saying Ms. Kyoko was murdered?"

B: "What?!"

D: "Didn't Ms. A just say something about not being allowed to participate in any investigations concerning her?"

A: "Oh, come on, that was just a figure of speech."

E: "What kind of figure of speech involves your friend dying?"

C: "As long as I'm around, no harm will come to Ms. Kyoko... or at least, that's what I'd like to say as her bodyguard. But considering I let someone like Ms. A near her, my words don't hold much weight. Not seeing someone as dangerous as Ms. A, that is."

A: "Don’t be so hard on yourself. The security at Okitegami Building was quite formidable."

E: "Spoken like a true repeat offender."

A: "The problem lies within Ms. Kyoko's very own Okitegami Building, specifically in her bedroom inside the Okitegami Detective Agency."

B: "Whaat?!"

A: "Oh my, judging by your reaction, it seems you already knew. What about the rest of you? Do you know, or are you simply pretending not to?"

D: "What are you talking about? If you keep being so vague, I'll lock you up for false charges."

E: "Please don't say that in front of a journalist. Please, Ms. A, continue. What exactly is in Ms. Kyoko's bedroom?"

A: "To be precise, it's on the bedroom ceiling. 'From today onwards, you are Kyoko Okitegami. You will live as a detective.'"

B: "..."

C: "Huh? That's... different from what's written on her left arm, right? Her memo..."

E: "The wording is slightly different."

A: "It's completely different. What's written on her left arm is 'I am Kyoko Okitegami—'. It's a memo, as you said. But what was written on the ceiling was an imperative sentence. And the handwriting was completely different from Ms. Kyoko's."

B: "Ms. A, why would you..."

A: "I'm more surprised that you knew about it, Mr. B. Out of all of us, you're in the least likely position to know. You're not her assistant, a police officer, a journalist, or even a friend."

E: "Indeed, why would a mere client be in Ms. Kyoko's bedroom...?"

D: "So you're not just a mere client, you are actually a pest...?"

B: "Hey, that's a false accusation! I don't recall doing anything bad! Besides, I wasn't going to say 'Why would you know about that?' I was going to say 'Why would you say that out loud?'"

A: "Because I had to! A secret like this about the Forgetful Detective is too much to bear alone. I just had to share it with everyone..."

B: "You and your loose lips!"

E: "I hate to be the one to say this, but you shouldn't be discussing this with a journalist. If you tell me a scandal like this, I'm going to write an article about it."

D: "Is it really a scandal? So what if it says 'You will live as a detective' on her ceiling? That's not evidence that Ms. Kyoko's been committing financial fraud."

C: "Let's not assume the 'money-grubber' has committed any fraud, shall we, Mr. D? You 'False Accusations Producer.'"

D: "It's 'False Accusations Factory.' I churn out false accusations like a well-oiled machine."

B: "That's terrifying."

D: "Don't be scared of me. Be scared of that writing on the ceiling..."

A: "I'm not scared. I'm angry! I'm filled with righteous indignation! Because, if you think about it, this is physical evidence that someone is forcing Ms. Kyoko to be a master detective!"

A Message from Above (the Ceiling)

D: "Huh? Physical evidence? How do you figure?"

E: "This is what Ms. A is trying to say, isn't it? The Forgetful Detective, whose memories reset every day. But if the foundation of that is a message, no, an order written on the ceiling... then the very definition of the Forgetful Detective is flipped on its head. Because it means someone is taking advantage of Ms. Kyoko's amnesia to make her believe she's a master detective. In fact, even the name 'Kyoko Okitegami' could be fabricated information forced upon her."

D: "Well, it never sounded like a real name to begin with."

A: "Stay focused, Mr. D. I'm being serious here! I want all of you to share in my anger! My rage!"

C: "So instead of sharing a secret, you're sharing your anger? How absurd. You haven't tweeted about this, have you?"

B: "Mr. C, you... you didn't know? Given your position, I thought you'd be in the loop..."

A: "He is a live-in security guard, after all."

C: "Unlike some people, I respect my employer's privacy."

A: "Let's not blame Mr. B. This isn't a place for accusations."

C: "I was trying to blame you, Ms. A, though..."

D: "I get that you're angry, Ms. A, but isn't this a bit of a leap in logic?"

A: "A leap in logic? What do you mean?"

D: "Typical you, jumping to conclusions. You said the handwriting was completely different, but of course it would be! Writing on paper—or even your arm—is completely different from writing on a ceiling. Besides, judging by the content, it wouldn't be strange if it was written hastily or even scribbled."

E: "Are you saying Ms. Kyoko wrote it herself?"

D: "It's not about who wrote it... there's no reason why the memo on her arm and the one on the ceiling have to be identical, word for word."

A: "But it was an imperative sentence! As if someone was trying to drill it into her brain!"

D: "That's just your interpretation. When I was studying for entrance exams, I used to put up notes on my wall. Things like, 'Your life depends on this,' or 'Sleep and you die.'"

C: "You were pushing yourself too hard. What happened in your life to turn such a pure-hearted student into a... False Accusations Factory?"

D: "The point is, it's not that strange to address yourself in the second person. Maybe Ms. Kyoko just wrote a motivating phrase on her ceiling, something she'd see first thing when she woke up."

A: "Hmm, maybe you're right..."

B: "I'm surprised, Mr. D. You're capable of logical reasoning!"

D: "Who are you calling a biased, confession-obsessed detective?"

E: "Your self-awareness is astounding."

B: "But that's not all. I actually heard about the message on the ceiling from Ms. Kyoko herself. I mean, she doesn't know who wrote it either, but she said it definitely wasn't her."

Instigating the Detective

D: "You should have led with that. I might have falsely accused someone again."

B: "Don't make it sound like a catchphrase... Making (or forcing) assumptions is how false accusations are born. Anyway, I was sworn to secrecy about it."

A: "I wasn't sworn to secrecy. Well, Ms. Kyoko doesn't even know I saw it..."

B: "But wouldn't you normally think to keep something like that a secret? Why share it with everyone?"

A: "I'm not very good at 'thinking normally.'"

C: "That's an infuriating argument."

B: "Normal or not, it's common sense! This is about the Forgetful Detective's reputation! And you're making it public? By gathering us all here like this?"

D: "Is it really that big of a deal? It doesn't seem that important to me. Is it really something to get so worked up about? I mean, I admit I might be wrong, but even if someone else wrote it, it doesn't change who Ms. Kyoko is, does it? She's still the same person."

A: "You can say that because you're a police officer, Mr. D."

D: "Excuse me? I thought I was invited here for my professional opinion as a police officer. And I thought you were one too, Ms. A."

A: "Let me rephrase that. You can say that because you only know Ms. Kyoko as a police officer. As long as she solves the mystery, finds the culprit, and closes the case, you don't care about her past or why she plays the role of a master detective."

D: "Don't make it sound like a bad thing. While it might not technically be a false accusation to invent a crime that never happened... I admit, I don't expect anything more from Ms. Kyoko."

B: "I think Ms. Kyoko herself prefers that kind of business-like approach. Although, you did arrest her once, didn't you?"

D: "I didn't arrest her. And that's not something you should be discussing in front of a journalist..."

C: "Let's try to organize our thoughts. Calmly, and sticking to the facts... I understand both Ms. A and Mr. B's perspectives, and I have a different opinion myself. But before we delve deeper, let's establish the facts without letting our emotions get in the way."

B: "Are you sure about that? I feel like you're the one in the most awkward position here, Mr. C. You've been told something you weren't supposed to know."

C: "I'll be fired the moment she finds out I attended this symposium, so don't worry. First, there's a message written on the ceiling of Ms. Kyoko's bedroom. And it seems to be designed to instill a specific identity in her, considering her amnesia."

A: "Her name and her profession. Control those two things, and you control everything."

B: "If 'profession' is part of your identity, then mine is all over the place. I am, after all, the man who gets fired three times a day."

A: "What if that setting, 'the man who gets fired three times a day,' was decided by someone else? How would you feel?"

B: "How would I feel...? I'd hate it. I'd want to ask them why they gave me such a ridiculous setting."

A: "And that's exactly what's happening to Ms. Kyoko. Every single day. Every morning. Someone is giving her a name and a purpose."

B: "But being a master detective is..."

A: "It's a cool identity, so it's okay? Is that what you're saying?"

C: "Well, it's definitely cooler than being the False Accusations King or the False Accusations Factory."

D: "I can't deny that False Accusations Factory isn't exactly my favorite nickname. But even if being a master detective is a cool title... it's not all sunshine and rainbows. At least, I wouldn't want to be one."

B: "But Ms. Kyoko said she's happy being a master detective. Being Kyoko Okitegami. Regardless of who wrote that message or why, she's content with it."

A: "What if she's just been conditioned to think that? It's like those workers who die from overwork because they believe in the company's philosophy. What's the difference?"

D: "Isn't that just how work is?"

A: "Mr. D, please be quiet for a moment."

Kyoko Okitegami's Murder Case

C: "Now, now. But whether you find your job fulfilling or feel like you're being forced to do it is a fundamental question about work. I myself went through many twists and turns before joining the Okitegami Detective Agency."

B: "By the way, which is it for you now? Fulfilling or forced?"

C: "It's the kind of workplace where I'd be fired if I didn't say it was fulfilling."

A: "That sounds harsh. But in a way, it's even harsher for the employer."

B: "I think Ms. Kyoko is the type who finds her work fulfilling. But... you're claiming she's been conditioned to think that, right, Ms. A?"

A: "It's not just a claim, it's the truth. It's like she's been hypnotized. While Mr. D's 'post-it theory' has been debunked, the act of self-suggestion is still very intriguing."

C: "Self-suggestion, huh? Honestly, I don't think it's that simple. If I were to lose my memory and wake up to a message on the ceiling, I don't think I'd just accept it blindly. I'd probably overthink it and even feel repulsed, especially in such a vulnerable mental state..."

A: "I understand what you're saying. But the fact is, Ms. Kyoko accepted it and is actively working as a detective."

B: "So you're saying she's been falsely accused... of being a detective? But who's the victim in this scenario?"

A: "What do you mean?"

B: "Well, I think as long as Ms. Kyoko is happy, that's all that matters. Regardless of her past, there's no denying that she's good at solving mysteries. So..."

A: "Isn't it just that you, the 'False Accusations King' Mr. B, and the businesslike Mr. D, would be inconvenienced if Ms. Kyoko wasn't a master detective?"

B: "N-No, not at all! Neither Mr. D nor I are that selfish. That's the biggest false accusation of the day... You make it sound like I wrote the ceiling message for my own benefit!"

C: "I don't think Ms. A meant it like that... but your suspicious behavior of bringing it up yourself is what's cornering you, Mr. B."

B: "P-Please let me call me a detective!"

A: "Of course we'll call you one, once we reach a conclusion in this symposium. Or should I say, once we reach a verdict? Mr. B, you only see the bright side of the master detective. In a way, I

envy you... As a client, I might also want Ms. Kyoko to remain a master detective. But as a friend, I can't bear to see her in such a dangerous position."

B: "Dangerous... well, she does willingly involve herself in cases, so it's not exactly safe, but..."

C: "That's what I'm here for. Though I might be inadequate, considering I'm not enough to keep you away."

A: "Jokes aside, I'm sorry, but that's not good enough. Can you completely deny the possibility that the master detective might be killed by a criminal who felt threatened during a murder investigation?"

B: "Are you saying the message on the ceiling is a form of ‘dolus eventualis’? That someone is forcing Ms. Kyoko to be a master detective... and sending her into dangerous situations every day?"

A: "For Ms. Kyoko, there is only today—but if she keeps repeating such a precarious 'today,' a 'deathday' will eventually arrive, a day when she can't reach 'tomorrow.' For Ms. Kyoko, there is only a deathday—the current situation is like we're all just waiting for the day she gets killed."

C: "That's a bit far-fetched, don't you think? That hypothesis wouldn't even fly in a detective novel... as if there'd be such a thing as 'Kyoko Okitegami Murder Case'... well, maybe I just don't want to think about it. Actually, that might be the only way to kill someone as cautious as Ms. Kyoko."

B: "What are you even saying, Mr.C? If you're going there, then aren't Ms. A and Mr. D police officers who investigate cases too? Are you saying there's a trick at the heart of your career choices, designed to get you killed?"

A: "In our case, we have the advantage of being part of an organization. We can't compare our safety to that of a self-employed private detective... Even aside from financial matters, the Okitegami Detective Agency has its shady aspects."

C: "That's a low blow."

B: "W-Well, what about journalists like Ms. E?"

A: "It's true that journalism is a dangerous profession if we're only talking about safety... but Mr. B, aren't you forgetting a crucial fact?"

B: "Forgetting?"

A: "Ms. E isn't amnesiac, is she...? Neither are Mr. D or I, obviously. So that kind of career-choice manipulation wouldn't work. It's the perfect trick to kill Ms. Kyoko because it only works on her."

B: "...It's true that she's walking a tightrope where she could die any day... but to think it's a trap set to kill her... No matter how many times you say it, I can't bring myself to believe it. Isn't that way too roundabout?"

A: "If it's too far-fetched, no judge will see this ‘dolus eventualis’ as a crime—it's the perfect crime that Ms. Kyoko loves so much. You can easily kill someone just by writing two lines of text—I don't want to praise them, but the culprit is brilliant. You could even say they're a genius."

C: "Actually, writing on the ceiling takes a lot of effort..."

B: "This isn't the time to be making lighthearted comments, Mr. C! Not if it's true."

A: "That 'if it's true' is exactly what's lighthearted here. 'If it's true,' then Ms. Kyoko could die today, couldn't she? In that case, I'll have to take you in for questioning, Mr. B."

B: "Ms. A's turning into a 'False Accusations Factory'! Is she the new model?"

A Moment of Silence for Ms. Kyoko

A: "This is not a false accusation. Absolutely not. I'm not saying I suspect B of writing on the ceiling—though the possibility exists—but knowing about the message and doing nothing about it is a breach of your duty of care."

B: "D-Duty of care? I'm not Ms. Kyoko's benevolent guardian—I'm just a client. As much of a burden as I might be... are you saying I should have reported it the moment I knew? As a civic duty? But I never imagined that message was meant to kill Ms. Kyoko... and I still can't believe it."

A: "Then what's your theory, Mr. B? Who wrote it, and why? You're not going to tell me you haven't thought about it, are you?"

B: "W-Well, you see, *mumble*..."

A: "*Mumble*?"

B: "O-Of course I was curious. But I thought it was bad manners to pry..."

A: "You broke into a woman's bedroom, and now you're talking about manners? Astonishing."

B: "I didn't break in! ...I'm not saying this to clear my name, but the truth is, I've heard rumors about Ms. Kyoko before she became a master detective..."

A: "What? Before she was a master detective? You mean before she became Kyoko Okitegami—before her amnesia?"

B: "Yes, well... I'll refrain from sharing the details since it's private information—not that I know much. But I heard she was active in a literal danger zone, not just crime scenes."

A: "Not just crime scenes?"

B: "Battlefields, conflict zones, that sort of thing—that's what I imagine, anyway. Maybe that's why I can't see it. The phrase 'Live as a detective' being a message to kill her—in fact, I feel like it might be a message to save her, to protect her."

A: "To protect her—"

B: "I don't know what our bodyguard Mr. C thinks about me saying 'protect,' but... maybe the profession of 'detective' is the perfect safety device to minimize the use of Ms. Kyoko's immense potential. Imagine sealing technology capable of stopping wars into a handheld game console... a peaceful application like that... safe for everyone..."

A: "Are you serious? This is getting out of hand."

B: "The moment we started talking about Ms. Kyoko being killed, it was already out of hand for me. This is a whole epic saga. But if someone is trying to protect her, I don't think we should interfere—of course, it would be troublesome if she stopped being a detective and I was falsely accused... but if erasing the ceiling message and Ms. Kyoko no longer being a master detective would send her back to that real danger zone, that would be far more troubling."

A: "I see... even thieves have their reasons. You have your reasons for not divulging the message on the ceiling."

B: "Don't call me a thief! My point is, if we care about Ms. Kyoko, it's better not to make any rash moves. It's better to keep it under wraps that you saw the message on the ceiling... I know inaction might seem like a passive plan to someone as proactive as you... I'm impressed by your friendship that drives you to act, even if it's one-sided... I wouldn't be lying if I said I was moved. I wish I could be more like you. But this time... I don't think action is the answer. If something were to happen to her because we did something, you wouldn't be able to bear it as her friend, would you?"

A: "...."

B: "I can't just give my opinion as a client. And Mr. C, you don't intend to limit your input to just an assistant's perspective, right? It's difficult to assess whether Ms. Kyoko would be safer continuing as a master detective 'tomorrow' or not... This symposium can't simply be a neutral third-party committee."

C: "..."

B: "Of course, I can't force anyone to abide by the same strict confidentiality agreement that Ms. Kyoko does. All I can do is ask—you can't just forget what you've heard. Besides, Mr. D might have a different stance... After all, as a police officer, you've had your issues with her before, haven't you?"

D: "..."

B: "Come on, you don't have to be so silent. You're making me nervous, like I'm about to be arrested. So, Ms. E, as a journalist, I know you can't stay quiet, but please treat this matter with the utmost secrecy—"

E: "..."

B: "... Um, Ms. E? You can't stay quiet... right? You've been awfully quiet for a while... Are you really such a good listener, even as a journalist...? And Mr. D, even though you were told to stay quiet... If you were just engrossed in the story like Mr. C, that would be one thing, but you've been like this for a while..."

A: "..."

C: "..."

D: "..."

E: "..."

B: "H-Hey, everyone, what's wrong? Don't tell me you all fell asleep? You're not Ms. Kyoko... You can't just go silent during a symposium, especially not in the middle of such an important discussion! Why are you all looking at me with those blank eyes...? It's like... like you were drugged... like Ms. Kyoko..."

A: "..."

C: "..."

D: "..."

E: "..."

B: "This is bad! Someone call an ambulance—no, call the police! I... I can't move...? Don't tell me... I was also... drugged...?"

A: "..."

C: "..."

D: "..."

E: "..."

B: "P-Please let me... call a—"

X: "—You won't be calling anyone. You see, Mr. Yakusuke Kakushidate, you're going to take the fall for the mass poisoning."

B: "W-Who are you!? Y-You!? No way—it can't be!"

X: "I am X, the representative of the criminals. The X who will silence all of you who have learned the truth. And the X who will kill Kyoko Okitegami tomorrow."

(To be continued in "Kyoko Okitegami's Reunion")

*TL Note: Just for completionism's sake, A - Koshimai, B - Yakusuke, C - Mamoru, D - Hidarui, E - Kakoi. Even though the beginning feels a bit 4th wall-breaking and Koshimai would have to be really nosy to get to know the other four had ties with Kyoko, it's also true that we did kind of see vols 9 to 11 pointing in the direction of these "Kyoko's Avengers" (lol) slowly gathering. However, there are no mentions online of this "Kyoko Okitegami's Reunion" (掟上今日子の再会) to date